A1/33
COMPUTERIZED

A Rash Experiment

:: :: By B. M. Croker :: ::

Author of "Lismoyle," "In Old Madras," etc.

B.37
51.1
A.90

LONDON: HUTCHINSON & CO.
:: :: PATERNOSTER ROW :: ::

GOVT: COLLEGE FOR WOMEN SRINAGAR

LIBRARY

Class No. F

Book No. C 94 Ra

Acc. No. 186

(117)

Acc. No: 186

A RASH EXPERIMENT

CHAPTER I

IT was four o'clock in the afternoon, on board the P. and O. *Calcutta;* under the awning on deck, more than two hundred passengers were sitting, strolling, and lounging, having come up in search of a little breeze to stimulate their appetites for dinner,—for they were under a tropical sun, and in the Red Sea: the Red Sea was at present, smooth as glass, as the *Calcutta* went throbbing through the water resembling "a painted ship upon a painted ocean." Overhead the sky was of a deep, opaque blue, entirely cloudless, the African and Arabian coasts dimly visible on either side, were of a fainter and more delicate shade, but neither those far-away mountains, nor the sky itself, could outrival the eyes of a girl, who was below stairs, sharing a cabin with a fellow-passenger. Strange to say, the two Miss Brownes were not related, they had made acquaintance at an hotel in Colombo,—attracted by identity of name—and when they came on board the mail boat, elected to share the same cabin for the voyage, and were already the best of friends. Apparently they had found the heat intense, for the port-hole yawns to its utmost extent—which is not saying

much—and one of the girls lies in her berth, apparently in the last stage of exhaustion.

A refined, delicate-looking young woman, of about five or six and twenty, who gave one the idea, that so far, life had been something of a struggle; for deep lines of premature care, were ruled into her forehead, and about the corners of her mouth. Her hair was loosely pushed back from her aching temples, and her eyes were riveted on her companion, who was standing in the middle of the cabin with her dress off, her magnificent hair cloaking her to her knees; slowly fanning herself with an enormous black fan.

This is the Miss Browne, with the blue eyes, Miss Browne the wealthy orphan, the Australian heiress, who was about to visit England for the first time.

"Did you ever feel anything so baking hot as this afternoon has been? Pouf! I wish I might run up on deck, like this, and get a breath of air!" tossing back her heavy locks, and displaying her bare arms.

"My dear," replied a languid voice from the berth, "you wouldn't call this anything,—if you had been in India."

"Well! at any rate, you are knocked up, Anglo-Indian though you are," retorted the wielder of the fan.

"That's very true, but then I'm a wretched specimen of humanity, and no more fitted to go out into the world, and earn my bread, than——" pausing for a simile—

"The Captain's canary!" suggested her friend, with a smile. "Poor Rachel, you ought to have been rich, according to the fitness of things. You are fastidious, and reserved; very quiet, and very clever! You would do most beautifully for the rich Miss Browne—and I for the poor one!"

"I don't think you and poverty, would agree at all,"

replied the lady in the berth, with an air of calm conviction ; " you have not the least idea of what it means to go without things, and to be unpleasantly short of money ; no ! you and poverty, would not assimilate ! "

" Yes we would," retorted the other emphatically, " far better than you suppose. I am self-reliant, energetic, firm of purpose,—my relations call it obstinacy,—and latterly I have been living upon a sheep run, entirely out of the way of luxuries ; moreover I have robust health. Yes, I am far fitter to go out into the world and fend for myself, than you are, my poor dear Rachel ! "

" I heartily wish we could change places," said the other with a smile ; " I'm only too willing to be the rich Miss Browne ; if you will endow me with all your goods and chattels, and a balance at your bankers."

" And you are taken for the heiress," said her friend with a knowing nod. " I believe most people on board, imagine that you came from Melbourne and I from India."

" My dear Helen, how can you be so ridiculous ? "

" I'm perfectly serious, and their mistake is natural. You are silent, retiring and stand-off," replied Helen, tossing back her hair and commencing to pace the cabin. " All that looks like *money!* You dress better than I do," declaiming with a fan. " Now I am much more approachable, and talkative, my wardrobe is of the backwoods, and sweet simplicity itself. I am sociable, and easily amused,—and the result is, that you, because you hardly open your lips, are treated with deference, and respect, whilst *I*, am patronized, and kept in my place ! "

" Yet, you have thousands a year, and I'm going home to earn my bread as a governess," rejoined the girl in the berth somewhat bitterly. " You see," she

proceeded slowly, " people do not grasp the idea, that an heiress has the right to be as lovely as Hebe herself. It is not according to the fitness of things, that fortune should shower all her gifts on *me*, they imagine I'm the heiress, because I am plain,—and you are a pauper, because of your pretty face, and wonderful good nature ; you make yourself too cheap running messages, and amusing other people's children," concluded Miss Rachel Browne, closing her eyes, with an expression of grave disapproval.

" You don't care about the rising generation, do you ? " said Helen, commencing to plait the long strands of her golden tinted brown hair. " Poor Rachel, I pity you ; yours will be such an uncongenial task.—Now for my part, I like the little imps ! "

" Thank Heaven, there is only one olive branch for me to look after in my situation," announced Rachel, crossing her arms behind her head, and surveying her friend's toilet with languid interest. "Once I little dreamt, that I should come to going out as a governess, but necessity knows no law. Any way, I'm starting a new life—and it has compensations ? "

" I wonder you never married ? I thought all girls in India ' went off,' as they call it, as a matter of course," observed the young lady at the glass,—now winding the mass of plaits into a knob at the back of her head,—and searching vainly for hairpins.

" Married ! " echoed the other with a gasp, and colouring vividly, " what an absurd, and old-fashioned idea ! Not one out of ten girls in India, marry now,—the market is overstocked. I went out to my brother, my only brother,—as I think I told you, I have spent five years in the gorgeous East, and here I am, returning to Europe, like the traditional bad penny ! "

" And your brother ? " said Helen, who had been

surveying the back of her head with a hand-glass, and paused in her inspection.

"My dear brother is dead; and I am more or less alone in the world," replied the elder Miss Browne in a faint voice.

"Never alone in the world, so long as *I* am in it," replied her impulsive cabin mate, suddenly kneeling down beside her, and putting a slender arm round her neck; "you know you are my friend,—and my friends are so few, that I cannot afford to lose sight of them. There! There is the first dinner-bell? Get up, Rachel dear, get up at once, and I will do your hair! Hurry or you will be late."

CHAPTER II

"DO you remember what we were talking about this afternoon, Helen?" inquired her friend, as she took a seat beside her, on the moonlit deck.

"We were talking of so many things," she replied.

"I mean, what we said about changing places! I do believe there *is* something in your idea, that I am supposed to be the rich Miss Browne! The Captain was chaffing me at dinner, and spoke about a person with thousands and thousands like *me*—deluded man! —if he only knew the truth. This day month, my duties will have commenced—and I shall be Mrs. Despard's governess!"

"Despard?" repeated her friend, "How funny! Why that is the name of my aunt, and not a very common one.—Where does your Mrs. Despard live?"

"Near Thornhurst, in Sandshire; she is the cousin of a lady I knew in India; an old friend, who found me the situation, and gave me a splendid character. It

seems strange for anyone to take a governess from *India*, but I am well-recommended, and I am competent to teach music, French, drawing and singing,—also, I am *cheap!*"

"Do you know that Mrs. Despard *is* my aunt; there cannot be two of that name at Thornhurst, can there? So we are actually bound for the same house? Well the world is a small place," opening her eyes and gazing at her companion with all her might. "What a coincidence!" said Helen. "It seems too strange to be true, but I know that odd things do happen. On my Uncle Macgregor's run, two brothers met, who had not heard of one another, for more than twenty years."

"The aunt you spoke of, your father's only sister, who wrote you such delightful letters,—can she be *my* Mrs. Despard? It seems impossible!"

"But it is a fact. Our Mrs. Despards are identical, I will prove it to you at once. Come to the cabin, and we will compare our correspondence," rising and hurrying to the top of the companion ladder, and flying downstairs.

"Here is mine, my very last," she said, laying a sheet of foreign paper in the hand of her more deliberate friend, who had followed her into the cabin, and closed the door. "Read it, and judge for yourself."

"MY DARLING NIECE,

"By the time this reaches you, you will be on the point of sailing, and I send one line, to assure you, that we are actually counting the days till you arrive. Your room is ready, your cousins have been very busy doing it up with blue and white draperies, and making a charming bower for your reception. Your uncle is looking out for a saddle horse to suit you, and I have heard of an excellent maid,—so I hope everything will

be in readiness, when you come amongst us. You must make up your mind, not to think of us as strangers, but as your nearest and dearest of kin; we are all looking forward to giving you a hearty welcome, and adopting you as one of the family. My Blanche is about the same age as yourself, and I feel certain, that you and she will be like sisters.

"Ever your affectionate aunt,

"ISABELLA DESPARD.

"P.S.—Your uncle will meet you at Southampton."

"A charming letter," said Rachel, folding it up slowly, and returning it to its envelope. "Now you shall read mine, received, just as I was leaving Madras,—you see the handwriting is identical."

"DEAR MADAM,

"My cousin Mrs. Phillips informs me, that you are leaving India immediately, and that I may expect you about the 1st of December. I hope she has thoroughly explained my wishes, and that you fully understand your duties. You will have the entire care of a girl of twelve, and her wardrobe; music, French, English, drawing, are, I believe, your acquirements. I shall expect you to read French with my eldest daughter, accompany her in singing, and be as much as possible of a companion to my second girl, who is a confirmed invalid! You will breakfast and dine in the school-room, and take lunch with us,—unless there are visitors in the house. All these little things are so much better understood, when plainly put down in black and white. You pay for your own washing and travelling expenses; salary as agreed, thirty pounds a year. As you are not certificated, I could not possibly offer you

more. I trust you are all Mrs. Phillips states, and that you have a robust constitution,—and an even temper.

"I remain yours faithfully,

"ISABELLA DESPARD."

"What a horrid, cold, formal letter; not the least like mine," said Helen, sitting down in her berth, and embracing her knees with both arms.

"My dear, you must remember, that you are her rich niece, and I am her cheap governess; there *is* a difference," said Rachel dryly.

"Did Mrs. Phillips tell you anything about my aunt? What kind of a person she really was?" inquired Helen with a thoughtful face.

"Oh, yes, she told me a great deal about her."

"Which you will at once repeat to *me*," said Helen eagerly.

"I shall do nothing of the sort!" rejoined her friend. "I am sure she will be delightful to you,—and that is all that matters."

To this Helen made no reply, but sat for some moments still nursing her knees, in rapt contemplation of the cabin carpet.

"I have it," she cried at length, "a magnificent idea!" jumping up and confronting her companion with a face of radiant elation. "Listen to me, Rachel," putting her arm round her, "I have the most abject horror of being liked for my money,—and not for myself. I would give anything to know the luxury of feeling, that people cared for me,—and not my fortune. Suppose I were to go among my relations as the governess,—and you as the niece?"

"Helen, you are stark, staring mad!" ejaculated her friend, with an expression of stunned amazement.

"No! I have method in my madness; I shall

discover what sort of people my relations really *are*, and I can act the governess. I can play the piano, and sketch, read French, and sing,—I had the very best masters in Melbourne! I am also Miss Browne. The whole thing, is only too beautifully simple; I seem to see the hand of Providence in my having come across *you!*"

"It would be a most unfair deception; your relations would never forgive you, and I, for one, will have nothing to say to your scheme," protested Rachel with emphasis.

"Oh, yes you will," replied Helen. "Wait and see all the pros and cons, before you make up your mind! In the first place," now reckoning on her fingers, and speaking with great animation, "I shall have an opportunity of making friends on my own merits; secondly, you will enjoy a comfortable and luxurious home, as long as you are in *my* shoes. You say, you want a rest; you are not strong, and absolute idleness, and freedom from care and bother, will do you no end of good,—can you deny that?"

"So you think I shall be entirely free from care, whilst I am acting the part you allot me! On the contrary, I should have a sword of Damocles hanging over my head. I should be always expecting to be found out! I know none of your connections,—nothing about familiar family names, or events—or——"

"Neither do I," interrupted her friend, triumphantly. "I was born in Australia, and I am as ignorant of our English belongings as you are. Aunt Despard hadn't written to father for years and years. She had no idea that he was a wealthy man until lately. He told me, he had always been looked upon as the scapegrace of the family. When he left the army and got into debt, all his family washed their hands of him, so he went out to Australia,—to the goldfields. He had no luck there, and

by and by, he drifted up to my grandfather's run,—where he was one of the stock-riders. As he was remarkably handsome, a splendid horseman, and a thoroughly good sort,—my mother, Ailsa MacGregor, fell in love with him, and they were married; later on he got a legacy and an opening in Melbourne through an old friend; by and by he began to speculate in buying land in the neighbourhood of the city, and filled his pockets with gold,—and that is his history! Poor dear father," she added with tears in her eyes, "he often regretted, that he had not gone home, and made friends with his sister on *my* account. He always had a hankering after the old country. More than once he planned to return, but something always turned up to prevent the trip, and his business, required him to be on the spot. My aunt and uncle who live upon a run, in Queensland, would gladly give me a home for life,—and were much against this expedition of mine, but I was determined to make it,—and for more reasons than one,—and stood out against *every* argument. After all, I am my own mistress,—or will be—when I am one and twenty,—and almost alone in the world!"

"No one with thousands a year need ever be *alone*," cynically remarked her companion. "No, no, you are not to be pitied, my dear. You have youth, health, good looks,—and money. What more would you have?" she demanded almost fiercely! "Kindly look at me! I am almost penniless, friendless, and in wretched health; the doctors say, I have disease of the heart and may die any day, Yes! and the sooner the better," she added in a hard, unnatural voice.

"Rachel! how can you say anything so wicked?" exclaimed Helen with a gasp of horror.

"My dear girl, if you'd been knocked about as I have, by the storms of Fate; if you had led a life as

miserable as mine,—all you would ask for, would be a quiet, painless death,—life has nothing left to offer *me*."

"You will think differently some day, Rachel; you are in low spirits, because your health affects your mind. The blackest cloud has a silver lining; when things come to the worst,—they mend."

"My affairs are past mending," returned Rachel gloomily; "some day, I will tell you the story of my life, Helen, and then you shall judge for yourself."

"Tell me now, darling! I know you have some heavy trouble on your mind. It may ease you to talk of it! Do tell me *now*," urged Helen pleadingly.

"Not now,—another time," shaking her head inflexibly.

"Well then about my plan! Will you agree to it? It can do no harm to you,—you will be obliging me, and I'll take the whole responsibility upon myself," spreading out two pretty little hands!

"And how long do you propose to play your part, Helen?"

"Just a month,—a whole month! That will give me ample time, to ingratiate myself with aunt, uncle, and cousins."

"Oh, you silly, silly girl; and at the end of that period, may I ask what is to become of *me*,—the impostor? I shall be turned out on the doorstep, bag, and baggage, without wages or character, and my last state will be worse than my first."

"Your last state, will be better than your first; for if my relations do not take our little surprise in good part,—and are not really nice people, we will leave together; you shall be *my* governess, and have the sole charge of me; so now agree! do say yes! Do!

do! darling," putting her arm round her friend's neck, and giving her half a dozen coaxing kisses.

"I don't believe we could act our part for a single day," protested Rachel, relenting. "You are not qualified to teach, I am certain."

"Yes I am, you rude girl! Father and mother were excessively proud of my playing, and singing. I had a French nurse, when I was a small child, and I can jabber away with the best. I won't say my French is Parisian, but it's *quite* intelligible! I'm very fond of needlework, and am not ashamed to wear the hats, I trim myself."

"French and millinery, are all very well; I shouldn't have thought teaching was at all in your line," said Rachel.

"You will see! we colonials are uncommonly smart and adaptable—I'm aware that self-praise is no praise. Please remember that I am now the governess in embryo, and you are a young lady from Melbourne! Promise me not to undeceive our fellow passengers."

"Oh, I don't mind *them*,—there's not much harm in a little joke, as far as they are concerned,—but the other scheme, is entirely different. Different, difficult, and dangerous. I'll never take part in that."

"Tea, young ladies!" said a merry voice outside the door, and a head of frizzy hair, and a pair of bright eyes were introduced round the curtain.

"Now remember it's all settled," said Helen, squeezing her friend's hand. "I am going to talk about children, and lessons, and *India*. I intend to practise my part at once. In future," pausing with her hand on the door handle, and looking back at her companion with laughing eyes, "*I*, am the poor Miss Browne!"

CHAPTER III

ALGERNON BEAUFORT BROWNE—the family were particular with regard to the final " E,"—was well-born, and well-educated, but a taste for speculation on the Turf, and a resulting smash, had compelled him to leave the Army, and begin a new life under the Southern Cross.

But " B.B." as he was nicknamed, was in the Colony a long time, before he " made good," or what could reasonably be called " a start." He tried his luck in the goldfields, and in the pearl-fisheries; finally he became a stock-rider, on a vast ranche, some hundred miles from Melbourne. The ranche was owned by a hard-bitten old Scotchman, named Angus MacGregor; a man of very good family, who thirty years previously, came out to seek his fortune, and had succeeded! He was hard, dour, thrifty,—rich—but just, and if he got an immensity of work out of his employés,—he and his wife, put their shoulders to the wheel themselves! His family consisted of a son, and daughter; and there was considerable conversation, and consternation, when the daughter confessed, that she had fallen in love, with the handsome Gentleman stock-rider! She was a remarkably pretty girl; every bit as "dour" and determined as her parents,—and sooner than have the scandal of " a runaway match," and as Algernon Browne,—whose only fault was an empty purse, was generally liked, and considered " a good fellow," a wedding took place in the station parlour, and the young couple were endowed with sufficent means, to set up a small home. Just at this propitious time,

Algy Browne's old aunt at Bath,—who had always kept a soft corner for the exile—died, and left him ten thousand pounds. With this welcome sum, he speculated in land and town plots in the neighbourhood of Melbourne; he also speculated in wool, and in a few years became a wealthy man,—owning a fine house at Toorak, a charming wife, and one small daughter. Little Helen, was brought up with the greatest care; no trouble or expense spared, and by the time she was seventeen, was unusually well-informed, and accomplished,—perhaps a little old for her age, from being so much in the company of her devoted elders. However, she had a number of lively young friends, and her mother—a MacGregor of MacGregors—and inclined to be reserved, and exclusive,—allowed her to join a tennis club, and dancing classes. When she was eighteen, she made her début in Melbourne society, and was having, what is known as "a very good time," when an epidemic of influenza, which swept through the city, carried off both her parents within a week! Helen, who had herself been a victim, felt completely stunned by this double calamity. Her Aunt and Uncle MacGregor, came down from Wurra Burra, closed the big house at Toorak, and carried her home with them. Her uncle had been left her guardian, until she came of age—in two years' time. For some months, she felt too much overwhelmed to care for, or take the smallest interest in anything. Although the household at Wurra Burra were kind, and sympathetic: there was her busy, sharp-spoken, Uncle Angus, Aunt Mitty,—his handsome, and capable wife, her two cousins, Jean and Elspeth—fine, well-grown girls—magnificent horsewomen, able to turn their hands to anything, from making a shirt,—and washing it too! to trimming a hat, or driving a team. They also excelled at tennis.

There was also her cousin Hector; a hardy, sunburnt, typical colonial; tirelessly energetic, a marvellous rider and shot, quick-tempered, brusque and independent. It was not long before he fell in love with his cousin Helen; although at first he kept his feelings well in the background. He taught her to ride,—as riding is understood up country,—and took her long gallops over the run, and did his utmost to imbue her, with a taste for this wild, free life. From her, he learnt a little of town manners, and ideas; he enjoyed various books she lent him, he delighted in her singing, and after some time, was actually persuaded to learn to dance!

But when Helen had been a year upon the run she began to weary of its monotonous life; the blue gum-trees, the wattles, the endless masses of sheep, the complete lack of society,—such as she had been accustomed to, and to long to escape to England, to make acquaintance with her father's people,—or rather with his sister, Mrs. Despard, who had sent her such sympathetic letters, and pressing invitations to come to Thornhurst. But Aunt and Uncle MacGregor did not smile on Helen's plans. What did she want, running off to England? Why could she not content herself like her cousins? a fine healthy life, with splendid horses to ride, no hard manual labour,—as used to be, formerly,—and not a few nice, cheery neighbours, within from thirty to fifty miles.

Was Helen going to be as headstrong, and obstinate as Ailsa her mother? Did they but know it,—she *was!*

Aunt and Uncle MacGregor, were naturally Early Victorian in their ideas, and ruled their little family with unquestioned authority. The two girls, had next to no liberty;—as liberty is at present understood! With Hector, it was different. He went and came

much as he liked, business took him down to Sydney or Melbourne, half a dozen times in the year, and there he made his own friends.

Mr. and Mrs MacGregor, had tacitly agreed, that Helen was to marry Hector. "Why allow such a fine fortune to go out of the family?" the lad was a splendid-looking young fellow, where could the girl do better? The riding, and dancing lessons, were encouraged, and viewed with complacency and favour. Jean and Elspeth too, who were fond of Helen, nourished secret hopes, and perhaps unconsciously put a certain amount of pressure on their cousin. Then all at once Helen appeared to rouse herself to the situation! She gathered the impression, of what was expected from her; they all wished to keep her with them, as Hector's wife. She liked Hector; she admired his horsemanship, his splendid physique, and courage,- -his rough honesty, but nothing would induce her to marry him! Once, she had discovered him asleep in the verandah,—he was snoring whole-heartedly, with his mouth wide open! Once, she had seen him in a towering passion, flogging an unruly horse. These little pictures dwelt painfully in her memory. Hitherto, with extraordinary cleverness, she had staved off his ever-dreaded proposal; but it came at last, and was repeated;—for Hector was one of those fine young heroes, who never know when they are beaten! Finally there arrived an acute crisis! and scene; but the whole weight of the family was powerless to move Helen. Much as she liked Hector,—she could *never* marry him. After this plain-spoken pronouncement, matters became distinctly uncomfortable, and strained. Hector went from home; and although her aunt and cousins, endeavoured to assume their usual manner, it was a failure; Helen realized that she was

under a ban. The situation became intolerable—and as a result she had several interviews with her uncle, and told him, that she had been sixteen months on the run now, and really wanted a change,—and wished to go to England. She was so eager, eloquent, and persistent, that she actually carried the day! although her uncle said, "Now mind you, Helen, you are going without *my* sanction; and I am your guardian. You are not your own mistress, for another twelve months, but as you are so 'set' and determined, on your own head be it! I do not approve of this expedition among strangers—for strangers they *are*—not like *us*, that you have known since you were a bairn; you might have waited till next year, and we'd all have gone home together; and had a good time. Your Auntie and I are getting up in years, and would like to see our far-away kin; but I cannot stir from here just at present. And then there's Elspeth's marriage that will be coming off,—for as no doubt you know, she is going to make a match with Archie Campbell."

"Yes, I know," assented Helen, "and a very nice fellow he is!"

"However," resumed her uncle, "as affairs are not very comfortable here just now, for any of us—go your own gait!—but mind, you are in charge of yourself, if ye get into any unpleasantness, during this twelvemonth, do not fall back on *me*, or look to me, to get you out of scrapes. I will pay your passage to Southampton, where your aunt will meet you, and I'll give you a hundred and fifty pounds in cash; for when you go to Melbourne, you'll be wanting an outfit, and cabin boxes,—and so on. I'll take you down, and put you on the steamer myself, and all I can say *is*,—that I hope I will never have cause to repent *my* weakness, and *your* foolishness,—and as I have said already, if

ill comes of this venture, 'on your own head be it,' and I warn you, if you fall into a pit, ye needn't look to your Uncle Angus, to drag ye out, like a sheep in a water-hole!"

"You may be sure, I won't have any adventures, Uncle," said Helen. "I shall be all right, you will see, and when you come home next year, -I shall be ready to welcome you, with open arms!"

The parting with her aunt and cousins, was tearful and affectionate; her uncle took her down to Melbourne, and saw her on board an Oriental Liner, in charge of a friend, a certain Mrs. Cooper, a widowed lady who was going to Ceylon, to stay with her son, a planter. A chaperon for half the journey; was better than no chaperon at all!

Helen found Mrs. Cooper an agreeable companion. Upon her invitation, she broke her journey, and disembarked at Colombo, and spent with her, a most delightful week. Young Cooper had come down to meet his mother, and he escorted them to Kandy, and other well-known sights.

This Eastern life, was a delightful novelty to Helen, and she was half-tempted to spend a couple of months in Ceylon,—as paying guest with Mrs. Cooper! However, with a great effort she resisted, this overpowering temptation.

She and her chaperon were staying at the Galle Face Hotel, Colombo, and among the passengers, awaiting the next Mail boat, was a solitary, delicate-looking young woman, who had arrived by a Coaster from Madras.

Benevolent Mrs. Cooper spoke to her, and drew her into their little coterie, and Helen was rather amused, and surprised, to find, that here was another "Miss Browne!" They made friends on the strength of their

mutual name, and journey,—and agreed to chaperon one another on the voyage home.

Once on board the *Calcutta*, cut adrift from guardian and chaperon, her own lawgiver, and mistress—how free and independent, was Miss Helen Browne!

CHAPTER IV

HELEN played her cards so well, and entered into the spirit of her part, with such ability and spirit, that her friend was borne along upon the tide of her impetuosity, and obliged to pose in an unresisting negative fashion, as the Australian heiress!

"You are carrying the joke *too* far, Helen," she remonstrated. "I heard you telling half a dozen people, that you were going to teach a girl of eleven, and asking Mrs. Howard, if you could dress on thirty pounds a year?"

"She thinks it a miserable salary,—and so it is," ignoring her friend's rebuke. "She says, *she* pays her maid forty,—and gives her, her gowns!"

"Well all I can say is, that you will be sorry for your folly some day, my dear; once, you begin to play with circumstances, you never know where you will end. 'Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when once we practise to deceive,'" she quoted gravely. "It is no use now, for me to declare, that I am sailing under false colours,—I accept the situation for your sake. I accept attentions not intended for *me*, I even talk of Melbourne, when people introduce that city into our conversation,—but I hate myself bitterly all the time! Once we land at Southampton, I warn you, that I shall cast off these peacock feathers, and be my own homely self—the jackdaw once more!"

The *Calcutta* made her way through the Canal, and out into the Mediterranean,—which for by no means the first time, greatly belied its reputation.

Instead of being blue, it was of a dirty grey ; instead of being smooth, it was exceedingly rough ; there was a horrid chopping sea ; then the wind got up in terrific force, and under the lee of Cyprus, they came in for a stiff gale. A gale, or Levanter, that raged, roared and blew, all day, with irresistible violence.

Rachel prostrate and terrified, lay in her berth,—which she had never quitted, since Port Said lighthouse had sunk below the horizon. She was weak, and faint, and refused all food. Helen tended her with affectionate solicitude ; making ludicrous struggles to stand and to walk, in spite of the violent lurching of the ship, and the semi-darkness of the cabin,—for the headlights were on, and the ports were closed !

Night came apace, there was a bad sunset ; the glass fell still more, the sea became mountainous, there was thunder, lightning, and torrents of rain. The roaring of the wind, the rattling of the thunder, the frightful rolling of the ship, was accompanied by continuous smashes in the saloon, and pantries. Boxes, chairs and even washstands, broke from their fixings, and dashed about the cabin. The scene was appalling, the sensation of lurching over, and going down, down, *down*, till one never expected to right again,—was sickening in the extreme.

Helen knelt by her friend's berth, with one hand in hers,—the other holding on convulsively to a brass rail,—now and then uttering some soothing little speech, or bathing the invalid's head with a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-Cologne. The sole light in the cabin, was from a candle in a swinging socket, which swayed to and fro, in a manner fearful to witness ! The

deafening noise overhead, made conversation impossible, —even had Rachel been able to reply to her friend's consolation, and words of encouragement.—She lay back in her berth, her eyes closed, her lips ash pale. She breathed in long-drawn gasps, and held Helen's hand, as if in a vice of iron.

Time went on, and still the storm raged, still Helen knelt on the floor cold and stiff, the candle had guttered out, and they were in complete darkness. At last, overcome by fatigue, she laid her head on the edge of the berth, and dozed off into a troubled sleep. From this, she was awoke, by a feeble tugging at her sleeve, and instantly roused to her usual alertness.

" Are you there, Helen ? " said a voice so weak, that she had to bend her head to the speaker's lips. " You have been very, very, kind to me—dear Helen, God bless you always, and keep you ; do not deceive your friends " . . . a long pause. " I want you to promise me one thing,"—bringing out the words with difficulty —" beware of him ; do not let him find Freddy, promise me this,—swear to me."

" I promise you anything, Rachel, if you will only keep perfectly quiet. The wind is really going down,— we are not rolling nearly as much as we were," said Helen soothingly,—fully impressed with the idea that her friend was rambling in her mind. Again, there was a long silence, broken only by the sound of seas crashing violently on the deck overhead, and the creaking, and straining, of the labouring ship.

When Helen next awoke, daylight cold and grey, was stealing into the cabin ; the floor was strewn with dresses, boxes, books, pillows,—she turned her eyes on her companion, who still retained her hand in a grasp of ice, her eyes were wide open, fixed and glassy, her features were rigid . . . she was dead !

ACC- NO: 186

CHAPTER V

THE following afternoon the wind had somewhat abated, the sea had subsided, and a funeral took place. The remains of Rachel Brown were enclosed in a coffin knocked together, by the ship's carpenter; very beautiful she looked in death, with her hands crossed on her breast; her face had a repose and tranquillity it had lacked in life. Many of the ladies on board visited the cabin of death, and more than one tear, was dropped over that marble-like form.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, the engines stopped, a bell tolled, most of the crew and passengers assembled in the gangway, whilst the Captain read the service for the burial of the dead, over the coffin which lay at his feet, covered by a Union Jack. At the words "We therefore commit her body to the deep," the flag was swept aside, and all that was mortal of Rachel Brown, disappeared from human eye, with one sullen splash.

Helen felt the sudden death of her friend most acutely, she was completely prostrated for several days, and did not appear among her fellow-passengers, until they were steaming slowly out of Malta Harbour, then she came up shivering, wrapped in a thick woollen shawl, and seated herself outside a circle of ladies,—who eagerly made room for her, and were all anxious to hear her version of the late melancholy occurrence.

"How *awful* for you, to be alone with her all night;—and she quite dead," said one, laying down her knitting, and addressing herself to Helen. "The doctor said,

she was dead at least two hours, before you called. It was heart disease; she always looked very delicate.—I don't suppose she could have lived six months."

"I wonder who'll get all her money?" inquired another, with an air of interest.

"Her money!" repeated Helen, in a low voice.

"Why, did you not know that she had thousands a year? She was an Australian heiress."

"Probably her father was a convict," supplemented a faded-looking little woman, with sandy hair.

"The Captain went through her letters, wrote home to her people,—and posted the news to-day," said the first speaker, "and he has put seals on all her things."

Helen's heart gave a sudden plunge, as she began to realize the truth; *she* was now to all intents and purposes "the poor Miss Browne." The heiress was *dead!* What would it avail her to declare, that the whole affair, had been a little friendly plot; just a joke, to while away the monotonous days on board ship. Who would believe her?

She hastened down to her former cabin; all Rachel's things were in their places, intact, untouched! but hers had been removed; her dressing-case, overland trunk, containing letters of credit, a copy of her father's will, photographs, letters, jewellery,—every means of identification had disappeared. Fortunately, she still possessed a little chamois leather bag containing a considerable sum of money,—but what was she to do? To tell the Captain the truth? how could she prove her words? She sat down on the empty berth, and thought over the whole matter with might, and main. If she were to go to the Captain, and say "*I* am the heiress. I've been deceiving you all the time,—it was only a joke," he would naturally reply:

"No, no! young lady, you would like to step into the dead girl's shoes, you would like to be the rich Miss Browne; but you have mistaken your man,—I am not a fool! You told me yourself, that you were going out as a governess, and you must stick to your character!"

Her ticket from Melbourne; if she even had that! but all her papers were naturally in her dispatch-box;—and they were sealed! There was nothing for it, but patience, and if the worst came to the worst, she must only accept the fate she was once so eager to secure, and take up the situation as her aunt's governess!

"You here, Miss Browne," said the portly stewardess, walking into the cabin. "Ah! it was a terrible shock for you, and you will miss her sorely. She was a nice quiet young lady, and never gave an atom of trouble, poor dear; she made a lovely corpse, ay, and she had her sorrows, sure enough; if you ask me,—I don't think she was a *miss* at all," she added mysteriously.

"What do you mean?" demanded Helen.

"I just mean *this*," replied the stewardess, diving into her pocket, and fishing out a fat purse with a brass snap. "See here," dangling a thin chain before Helen's eyes. "Do you see this?" holding out some object between her finger and thumb—"I found the chain around her neck, with a wedding ring fastened to it."

Helen took it into her hand, and turned it over with a face of blank amazement. There was no doubt about it, it *was* a wedding ring!

CHAPTER VI

HELEN found no one to meet her, when she landed at Southampton; she made her way up to London one miserably cold morning, in December. Mrs. Hancock, a fellow-passenger, had taken her under her wing, and together, they drove to a quiet family hotel; and having selected a bedroom, and seen her two modest boxes safely installed, Helen ordered herself, —that favourite beverage with all the sex—a cup of tea. As she sipped and sipped, she tried to devise some fixed plan of action, and after due consideration, came to the conclusion that she would sally forth, and buy some clothes,—for her heart recoiled from the dead girl's dresses,—then, she would call on her late father's solicitors, state the true facts of the case, and leave it for *them*, to get her out of her difficulty, as best they might!

Next morning, after an early breakfast, accompanied by Mrs. Hancock (as guide and counsellor), she started for Oxford and Regent Streets, and made purchases on quite a large scale,—a scale more befitting the Australian heiress, than the purse of a needy governess! She invested in a superb fur coat,—price forty guineas,— for she felt the cold most acutely,—a tailor-made, a black evening gown of French pattern; she had the good luck to be what is called—"a stock size." She also purchased a hat, muff, umbrella, and an assortment of dainty boots and gloves, in short she made a serious hole in her little capital of a hundred and twenty pounds. Greatly delighted with her morning's work,

Helen drove to the office of her solicitors, Messrs. Sharp and Smart, and asked to see the principal of the firm. Up shallow stone stairs and along vaulted passages, she was ushered into his presence, by an offhand guide, and found an ill-tempered, not to say disagreeable looking little old man, seated before a roll-top desk, writing letters on very blue paper. His appearance and greeting, chilled the very marrow of her bones. Here, would be no kind, fatherly sympathizer, with her folly, but a stern and merciless judge. Briefly and tremblingly she stated her case, without one single remark being made by Mr. Sharp; and when she had finished an ominous silence ensued, lasting quite for three minutes.

"A *very* pretty story indeed!" said his harsh voice suddenly, "it does your imagination the highest credit; but it won't answer here,—I have no time for fiction. Your fellow-passenger, the wealthy Miss Browne is dead, you the other Miss Browne, see no reason why you should not step into her shoes! If you have nothing else,—you have an uncommon amount of assurance, to say the least of it."

"But indeed, I really and truly am Helen Browne," faltered his miserable client on the verge of tears.

"Prove it?" he replied irritably. "Prove it? prove it?"

"I can't," she stammered, "all my boxes are in the Captain's care,—and sealed up as her property."

"Quite so, considering that they *were* her property. If yours,—why did you not remonstrate? why did you allow your belongings to be appropriated? You must be insane, to come to me, with such a cock and a bull story, my good girl. Come, I have no leisure for listening to romances,—I never had a taste that way, any time."

"But people in Melbourne can swear to me,—I'm well known out there," urged Helen, pertinaciously. "I can give you their names."

"Bring home your witnesses, and we'll see about it," said Mr. Sharp, with an unpleasant smile, taking up his pen, and preparing to resume his labours.

"I have no money, how can I bring them home?" urged Helen in despair. "Oh! what *am* I to do?" she added half to herself!

"Go and take up your situation, and forget this preposterous idea of yours, that is my advice *gratis*," said Mr. Sharp, dismissing her with a wave of his hand.

There was nothing for it but to depart, and Helen withdrew from the office in a kind of stupor, got into her cab almost mechanically, and was driven back to the hotel.

"What was she to do?" she asked herself, as she paced her room from end to end. She had just ten sovereigns in her purse, she had a hotel bill to pay, and her railway fare; she had decided to go to Thornhurst, it seemed the only course open to her. She must accept the rôle of governess,—at any rate for the present. After all it served her right, she couldn't help thinking, as she sat down, and wrote a note to her aunt, announcing her arrival.

Her story would be deemed incredible everywhere, she could not prove her identity for at least three months; meanwhile she couldn't starve! so a letter was dispatched to Thornhurst by the night's post, informing Mrs. Despard that her new governess awaited her pleasure at Baker's Family Hotel, in Bloomsbury. In two days, a freezing missive arrived in reply, Miss Browne was to lose no more time, but to start for her situation by the afternoon train, and would be met at Thornhurst station in due course.

Helen had already written a long letter of confession to her uncle Angus MacGregor, and implored him to write or cable to Smart and Sharp, and release her from the dilemma into which she had been landed, by her own folly.

Very speedily Helen made all arrangements for her journey, packed up her new wardrobe, paid her bill, and took her departure. The day was bitterly cold, as she glided out of Victoria station, the sole occupant of a second-class carriage. The fur coat was indeed a joy! Two hours' travelling and two changes, brought her to the small station of Kingsford in Kent; the nearest to her destination. The platform was empty save for one solitary porter; she alighted and looked about in vain expectation of seeing someone who had come to meet her? but there was not a single creature in sight; and presently the train moved on, leaving her and her luggage, unclaimed. She went into the waiting-room, and endeavoured to warm her frozen feet upon the fender, in front of a miserable fire. After a considerable time, a rough-looking countryman appeared in the doorway, and said:

"Be you the young woman for Thornhurst,—Miss Browne?"

An eager nod was Helen's reply.

"Then come along, I'm the farm bailiff, and I have a dog-cart here; the mistress bid me say, she couldn't send the carriage, as the horses had just been clipped and she was afraid of them standing in the cold."

Five minutes later, Helen and her boxes were hoisted into the dog-cart, and the stout unkempt-looking animal between the shafts, was bowling them along at a very liberal pace,—his head being set homeward. The driver impressed by his companion's appearance, her low voice and her magnificent fur coat, was now deferentially

attentive; giving his fair charge the whole rug to herself, and pointing out as they went along, every place of note.

"That's Foxford, with the two towers, over there among the trees! Miss Fox is the great heiress in these parts, has as good as the Bank of England at her back,—her father was a Bill-broker."

"I'm afraid I don't know what that is," said Helen simply.

"Well for you, that never heard of him," returned her Jehu, "but I'm told you come from foreign parts," he added compassionately, "you are Miss Lulu's foreign governess,—all the way from India."

To this Helen made no reply, and he continued, "The Lord help you, but you will have a handful with her! She's nearly been the death of five already. She is the most incorrigible, mischievous, impudent——"

"Do you live at Thornhurst?" interrupted Helen, whose heart sank at this description of her young charge; but who wished to restrain her companion's confidences.

"I do, so man and boy, matter of fifty year! I'm Tom Toke, the bailiff. The Squire, he farms a goodish bit himself, and keeps stall feds, and young cattle; so our hands are generally pretty full! My father was bailiff at Cardew, and I was born there, so we be always somehow in the family," he added with considerable pride.

"And where is Cardew?" inquired Helen, more from politeness than from any real desire for information.

"I'll show it you, when we come to the rise of this hill. It was the finest property in the county, till Sir Rupert's father made ducks and drakes of it; ay, he were a wild one, he were!" he added giving his horse a sharp cut.

"And who is Sir Rupert?" asked Helen indifferently.

"He is the master's nephew, his only sister's son. He lives mostly abroad, and he can't afford to keep up the place, and he won't hear of letting it, beyond the outlying farms, and the shooting. The house and grounds he keeps in his own hands, they say that he had a big offer to let it on lease to a rich London shopkeeper, but he wouldn't; he thinks no end of Cardew, and won't let none but the family, put a foot in it."

"Well I must say I think he is right," said Helen. "Why should he let his family place for half his lifetime, and wander about the world?"

"He wanders about enough as it is, he might as well have no home,—and he would have the satisfaction of the big rent in his pocket, if he was not so shockingly proud. He comes home for a couple of months, and lives in a couple of rooms, rides over the estate, looks into his affairs, and is off again, before you can say 'Jack Robinson!'"

"There it is," he added suddenly, pointing with his whip, to the low-lying country beneath him. "There you see the woods of Cardew, as far as your eye can reach; the house is half hidden behind that long belt of trees, the dark red building, with all the chimneys, and the moat!"

It was, indeed, a noble, wide-spreading property. No wonder its owner preferred a corner under his own ancient roof, than to fill his pockets by letting it to a wealthy tenant!

"It's a splendid place, isn't it, Miss?" said Toke with ill-disguised pride; "there's hardly another like it, between this and London; such an old-fashioned house, they do say, is a great curiosity in these times, and the timber is unparalleled," bringing out the long word, with immense triumph.

"But there's Sir Rupert's folly again! he won't let a stick be touched! If he was to marry an heiress now! That's the only hope I can see for him; sparing and saving as he is, he can make but little head amongst the mortgages. Ah, but the old gentleman was a fast-goer! Racehorses! hounds! cards! and the deuce knows what all besides! Here we are, this is our road," whipping up his steed, and whirling round the corner. "*We* are modern, you see," pointing to a large white building visible through the trees, at one side of the lane.

"All the same it's a pretty tidy place, and lots of good sound land," he added complacently.

Helen gazed eagerly at her future home, which stood on a slight elevation, and was surrounded by terraces, dotted with a considerable amount of white vases, and statues. Thornhurst was a large, uninteresting mansion, with regular rows of windows, and a heavy, pillared, porch.

They were soon winding up the neatly-kept avenue, enclosed on either side by deep, well-shorn banks, and within five minutes, had come to a halt in front of the hall door.

Mr. Toke descended heavily, and administered a hearty pull to the bell; which after a considerable time was responded to by a footman, in brown livery, with a scarlet waistcoat,—who looked for all the world like a supercilious robin redbreast!—in point of fact, he had been disturbed at his tea.

"Oh! so it's *you*, Mr. Toke," he exclaimed, glaring at the bailiff, who was in the act of slapping his arms across his breast with great velocity, and stamping his feet to restore them to animation.

"I might have known it, by the ring! So this is the young lady! If you will get down, Miss, your boxes will

be seen to. Mrs. Despard is in the drorin'-room. Who shall I say ? " he asked condescendingly.

" Say Miss Browne," replied Helen, who stiff, and benumbed with cold, had descended with considerable difficulty, and was only half way across the hall, when he flung open the door and announced her ! She was aware of a rustling and a rising in a dim room, a little smothered laughter, and a man's voice saying :

" Oh no ; I say let's have her in here ; and have a look at her first ! "

" Hush ! " said another, " she will hear you," and indeed Helen was already on the threshold.

" How do you do ? " asked a thin, frosty tone, and a tall, elderly lady rose to receive her, " you must have had a cold drive, I'm afraid. My daughter, Miss Despard ! " indicating a young lady seated in a low chair near the fire,—who slightly bowed her head. " My son, Mr. Adolphus Despard ! " continued the hostess, and a young man, who had hitherto been lounging on the sofa, now rose, came forward, and pressing Helen's hand very cordially, stared hard into her face,—but it was almost too dark to distinguish one feature from another.

After a few languid inquiries about Helen's journey, Mrs. Despard rang the bell, and shortly afterwards, a butler and two footmen entered, carrying lamps, and the tea equipage ! A table was wheeled before the mistress of the house ; covered with an embroidered tea-cloth, and a silver tray laden with an exquisite tea-service, of Crown Derby was laid upon it ; wafer-thin bread and butter and a cake were added to the repast, and the servants silently withdrew. Now that there was plenty of light, Helen looked curiously around. The room was lofty, large, and magnificently furnished, according to the latest mode. An open piano, was scattered over with music ; various *objets d'art*, were carelessly arranged

on tables, or in cabinets, and everywhere the eye ranged was evidence of taste, luxury and money. Helen glanced at her aunt, who was pouring out tea, a handsome woman with severe dark eyes, a well-cut nose, and a firm mouth and jaw; she wore a velvet gown, and the strong white hand that held the teapot, was loaded with sparkling rings. Blanche had moved a little away from the fire, but still leant back in her chair in an attitude of luxurious repose. Her book lay face downward on her lap, and her eyes were riveted on Helen. She was apparently about five-and-twenty years of age, her hair was profuse, and of a light sandy colour; her eyes, the palest grey. Her nose was insignificant, the one redeeming feature was her mouth,—which came between an exceedingly short upper lip, and a very pointed chin! Still with all its advantages, it was a sour, ill-tempered mouth, accustomed to saying exceedingly bitter things, and many a falsehood, had emerged from those pretty little red lips.

Mr. Adolphus Despard was an only son and heir,—this appeared to be his profession! He smoked, he dressed, he hunted a little, he went to races, and was more or less an idle young man about both town—and country. He was small, fair, and insignificant; always immaculately turned out,—he had been heard to say, that it was impossible for any fellow to exist without thirty-five pairs of trousers. At present he was reclining on the sofa in an easy attitude, caressing his little moustache, and staring at his mother's governess, with all the eye-power at his command.

She was rippin'! what a surprise! and quite worthy to be blest with his immediate attentions. His mother's and sister's eyes had not been idle either; they had been inspecting their new acquaintance with a certain amount of amazement, and dissatisfaction.

This girl with the pretty profile, and the low voice, was by no means what they would have wished for as an inmate. Supposing Dolly were to lose his head about her? supposing Rupert were to see her; supposing all manner of abominable things! Suddenly Helen met her aunt's inquisitorial eye, and coloured painfully.

"You are not the *least* like what I expected, Miss Browne," said Mrs. Despard, with a curious smile, "you are much younger than Mrs. Phillips led me to expect, and much more—er—remarkable-looking——"

"In short, my mother wishes you to understand, that you are a deuced sight too good-looking!" put in Dolly, with an air of easy frankness.

"Please don't mind my son!" said Mrs. Despard sharply. "By the by, you came home in the *Calcutta* with my late niece, Miss Browne. It was a very sudden thing, was it not? and very sad too," with a society sigh!

"Very sudden indeed," replied Helen, glancing at Mrs. Despard's plum-coloured gown,—not a scrap of black, no semblance of mourning. Mrs. Despard was an intelligent woman, and readily interpreted that expressive look.

"Poor girl! you see she had no friends or relations in this country but ourselves, so as we wouldn't be hurting anyone's feelings,—we did not go into black. We never saw her, you know, and we'd just got all our winter things,—it would have been extremely inconvenient."

"I wonder who'll come in for her money?" said Miss Despard, gazing speculatively into the fire. "*You* ought to, Mamma," she added with conviction.

"Did she seem liberal? Did she speak of us with affection on board ship?" inquired Dolly with a grin.

"Really I'm the last person to give you any information on that point," stammered Helen, stroking her muff with nervous fingers.

"Perhaps as Miss Browne has had rather a long journey she would like to go to her room," suggested Mrs. Despard after a rather long silence. "Blanche, will you take her upstairs,—if you don't mind?"

Blanche uprooted herself from her chair, with anything but a good grace, and led the way from the room with great dignity of demeanour, and up a wide shallow staircase, covered with carpets as thick and soft as moss, along a corridor, through a swing door, and then up another flight of stairs without any carpets at all! finally into a large, bare, very bare, bleak-looking room. A small iron bed stood on a carpet island amidst a waste of boards, a shabby, rickety wardrobe, occupied a niche in the wall, a painted dressing-table, belonging to its set, stood between the windows, the fireplace was empty, no attempt at luxury or comfort was visible, and the sole decoration the apartment boasted, was Millais' well-known picture of "Bubbles,"—possible value, half-a-crown!

"This is your room," said Blanche, waving a candlestick around! (How different to the promised bower of white and blue.) "If you will take off your things, I will introduce you to Lulu and Katie. By the way, did you get that fur coat in India? You never *did*, I am sure?"

"No, I bought it in London two days ago!"

"Bought it in London? you never mean to say so! Why it must have cost fifty guineas at the very least."

"No, only forty," replied Helen, as she removed it, and laid it on the bed.

"Only forty! well I must say that a young lady who

can afford to give that price for a winter coat, should have no need to go out as a governess," sneered Miss Blanche.

"I was foolish to buy it, I know that now," said Helen very humbly, "but I was tempted, I felt the cold so fearfully; I thought I could afford it, and afterwards discovered my mistake!"

"So I should imagine!" assented the other with scornful conviction. "I wonder if it would fit *me*?" walking over to the bed and proceeding to try it on. "Yes! it's not bad! I'll tell you what, Miss Browne, I'll let you have five-and-twenty guineas for it, if you like," said Blanche as she eyed herself in the glass, and smoothed down the fur, with much complacency.

Five-and-twenty guineas, for a coat that cost forty two days previously! Here was an offer! Was this the girl who was to have been as her sister? this mean creature, who would trade on the necessities of a poor governess? Never!

"No, thank you; as I have it I will keep it," said Helen with enforced composure, and a visibly heightened colour.

"Ah well! I daresay some day you will be sorry you didn't take my offer. It isn't everyone who will buy a second-hand article," handing the coat to its owner, who forthwith proceeded to hang it up in the rickety wardrobe.

"And now," added Blanche, "if you are ready, we will go down into the schoolroom."

CHAPTER VII

THE schoolroom was a bright, cheerful apartment, with plenty of light, a cheerful fire, and a well-spread tea-table. A fair, pretty, discontented-looking girl, was seated before the tray, sipping her tea, and reading a novel alternately ; another of about twelve, with pert, sharp features, searching little hazel eyes, and a wiry mane of bright red hair, was making herself a delicious concoction with the aid of cream-jug and sugar-basin. Both raised their eyes, as the door opened, and Blanche and a stranger came into the room.

" This is your new governess, Lulu," she said blandly, " Miss Browne."

" Bother ! I don't want any more governesses," returned she of the ruddy locks, alternately glaring at Helen and her sister, but making no effort to rise.

" And this is Katie," proceeded Blanche calmly. " Katie, I will leave Miss Browne with you now, I daresay she will have another cup of tea. *Au revoir !* " and so saying, she went out, shut the door after her,—and abandoned Helen Browne to her fate !

" Will you have some tea ? " said Katie, pushing away her book, and staring hard at her guest.

" Thank you, I should like some very much," returned Helen.

" You look as if you'd had no dinner ! " said Lulu suddenly, as she saw Helen help herself to a solid piece of cake. " Had you ? " she demanded imperiously.

" Well, to be honest with you, I have not dined ; but this will do perfectly well," replied the new governess.

"I say, what a shame! you've had nothing down-stairs; just like them! Kitty, ring the bell!"

"Do not mind anything for me," protested Helen hastily, "I like tea and bread and butter, better than anything else."

"Then your tastes are not luxurious," remarked Katie, "and it is well for you, they are not. I suppose you've seen your room?" she asked with significance.

"Oh yes,—it is quite all right."

"You came in the dog-cart! we saw you; father wanted to send the carriage, but mother wouldn't hear of it. I suppose Toke talked your head off,—he is the greatest gossip in the parish."

"He didn't tell me much gossip,—I'm too much of a stranger for that."

"By the way, I suppose you saw Dolly? I mean our brother Adolphus," asked Lulu.

"Yes!"

"I wonder which faction you will belong to?" continued Lulu, "the upstairs; or the down; Dolly and Blanche; or Katie and me? Government or the Opposition?—*We* are the Opposition."

"To both, I hope," returned Helen with a smile.

"That will be impossible,—there is no coalition; we are fire and water. We are the fire," pointing to herself and sister, with a somewhat sticky finger,—"they are the water; Dad favours *us*; the Mater backs them!"

'What a funny child you are! I'm sure you are joking," said Helen, with an incredulous laugh.

'Half joke, whole earnest,—as you will see."

"By the way, Miss Browne, you came home with our poor cousin, your namesake," said Katie, making an effort to stem her sister's confidences. "Do tell us about her? Did you know her well, was she nice?"

"Yes, I knew her very well,—but, I would rather not

talk about her," replied Helen, with her eyes on her plate, " it was all so dreadfully sudden,—rather a painful subject."

" Mother intended her to have married Dolly ! " resumed Lulu with eager loquaciousness. " *Now*, he will have to fall back on Miss Fox."

" Miss Fox ! nonsense, he hasn't a chance against Rupert," rejoined her sister scornfully.

" Oh, yes, I know she's dead nuts on him ; but he won't come up to the scratch, in spite of her thousands," replied this terrible young person ; " so I expect she will find half a loaf in the shape of Dolly,—better than *no* bread, —though Dolly is a rotter."

" My dear child, you mustn't talk like this ! " expostulated Helen. " Where did you pick up such ideas, and such slang ? "

" Ah, that's for *you* to find out ! and you can't stop me if I choose to *swear*," declared this hopeful pupil, squaring her elbows on the table, and grinning at Helen, with an expression of diabolical defiance. " However, I must say, I like the looks of you ; and if your looks don't lie, I shouldn't be surprised, if you and I, got on together quite comfortably."

" If you will give up slang,—we shall get on together famously," replied Helen, with animation.

Presently the tea-things were removed, and the three girls drew round the fire, and Helen noticed for the first time, that Katie, with her dainty little figure, her delicate, haughty face, was lame,—fearfully lame. Apparently there was something wrong with one of her hips ; she walked with a halt, and by the aid of a gold-headed cane. Poor Katie, she was always alluded to, as " Poor Katie." Perhaps this accounted for her distaste for society, and aversion to strangers ; her keen, satirical tongue, and her biting sarcasm. Luckily for

Helen, she had already found favour in the eyes of her future companions; she was young, and gay, and pretty, such a contrast to their former governesses,—very firm, and very conscientious. She ruled by kindness, but did not show her rule; guiding and restraining her wild, impetuous pupil with the most delicate of hands. In a surprisingly short time, she had obtained a wonderful influence over Lulu,—who, to the amazement of all, bent her stiff neck to the yoke, and persuaded by Miss Browne's entreaties and arguments, seriously applied herself to her long neglected lessons for four hours every day. The afternoons were free, and many agreeable excursions were made by the schoolroom trio, in Katie's little carriage, drawn by a fat piebald pony, called "Plum Pudding." Their favourite ride was over to Cardew, about three miles distant. Here they would put up the "Plum Pudding" and ramble about the house, the gardens, or the woods, returning to a substantial tea with Mrs. Bunce, the housekeeper,—a portly and good-humoured dame, who had grown grey, in the service of the Lynns.

During the spring many were the visits they paid to Cardew. Mrs. Despard and her eldest daughter and son were in London for the season, and Mr. Despard and the young people were left to their own devices,—and were by no means disconsolate.

Mr. Despard was a hale, bluff little gentleman, with a sunburnt, clean-shaven face, and snow-white hair, and rejoiced in a voice like Boreas himself.—He frequently joined the party in the schoolroom, where he seemed to be, completely at his ease, and to appreciate all the small family jokes; sometimes shaking the very ornaments with his roars of laughter. Occasionally they all dined with him in the library, and it was plain to Helen, that his daughter Katie, cripple, and cynic, was the apple

of her father's eye. Books, painting materials, jewellery and costly presents were loaded upon her, after each of his flying visits to the Metropolis.

* * * * * *

The long letter, which Helen had sent to her relatives at Warra Burra immediately on her arrival in London, had caused a profound sensation ; but the general feeling in the MacGregor family was, that her present dilemma served Helen right ! it would be a capital lesson for the young woman ; really more to her advantage, than otherwise. There would be, of course, a lot of bother with respect to her identification, Angus MacGregor might be compelled to go home, at the busiest time of the year ; altogether the reply to Helen's epistle, was in such a half-hearted vein, the trouble and inconvenience of a voyage was so insisted upon ; the hints, as to her situation being such a well-deserved punishment for playing the fool, so plain and unpalatable, that Helen's pride and temper was roused. By the time, this letter had reached her, she had settled down in her situation, and had become sincerely attached to her two younger cousins. She therefore sent her uncle a somewhat sharp dispatch ; saying, that she would not put him to any inconvenience, but would remain at Thornhurst as her aunt's governess, until December, when she would be of age, and they all came over, on their long projected visit, and could identify her. For although she was not in the position she had expected, she was living under her aunt's roof, and seeing English life from a very useful perspective, and if she were to have her real identity revealed, complications would be excessively disagreeable. She would, of course, have to leave Thornhurst, and where could she install herself ? It would be wiser, and more agreeable for everyone, for

her to remain in her present position until December.—By this letter "written in haste, and repented at leisure," Helen closed and locked the door of escape, with her own hands.

* * * * * *

Cardew is fitly described in the county guide-book, but a few words may be said about it here. It was approached by a long avenue, winding in and out through a domain of picturesque undulations, and adorned with magnificent old trees, separately, in clumps, or drawn up in formal lines,—like files of forest veterans. The house, built of dark red brick, nearly brown with age, was large and rambling, surrounded on two sides by a moat, half covered with water lilies. On the south side, its deep mullioned windows looked out upon the avenue, and a terraced garden,—with close-set yew hedges, and flights of shallow steps, leading down to the fountain, and fish-pond. Peacocks still sunned themselves on the broad walks, beds of fragrant old-fashioned flowers, gave forth their perfume into emptiness. The gardens were kept up with the most scrupulous care, and were one of the sights of the county.

The interior of Cardew, was in keeping with its surroundings. Apparently nothing later than the reign of Queen Anne, had been added to the furniture. The entrance hall was immense,—as large as a ball-room,—the walls were covered with old family portraits, pictures of short-tailed race-horses, and favourite hunters; battered casques, and old coats of armour, were ranged about in various niches, and not a few dusty flags and standards, depended from the oaken ceiling. The geography of the mansion was most intricate. There were the state apartments, the dining-room, white drawing-room, and library all on the ground floor.

Upstairs, there were the north and south wings, devoted to vast bedrooms, winding passages, cupboards and nurseries, and powder closets. The celebrated picture gallery occupied the whole of the west wing, and contained some valuable paintings and family portraits, by Vandyke, Gainsborough, and Romney. The Lynns mustered in great force; and good looks had certainly been their portion in no small degree. Soldiers there were in numbers, beauties with doves on their fingers, beauties very much unadorned, and beauties in powder and hoop. This gallery was the favourite haunt of the visitors from Thornhurst. They knew the history of almost every portrait; and each had her special aversion, and her particular favourite. They would sit in the deep mullioned window, overlooking the moat at the end of the gallery, and warmly argue the merits, and demerits of their choice.

Katie was in favour of a stern, elderly, but striking-looking man with a pointed beard and a ruff.

"He looks as if he had brains," she declared; "he was Admiral John Lynn, who helped to chase the Spanish Armada in the time of Queen Elizabeth."

"Fancy going to sea in a lace ruff!" said Lulu contemptuously; "he is a regular old fogy, and not to be compared to *my* man, in the splendid uniform of the Musketeers."

"Horrid renegade, why did he serve in a foreign army? I should be ashamed to own him," said Katie, with a decisive thump of her stick. "His picture should be burnt."

"I daresay he found the times were out of joint at home," said Helen; "but I wonder neither of you have chosen that cavalier over there; the one with the crimson scarf and his hand on his sword!"

"Sir Everard! Oh, is that your taste? then you will

admire Rupert, for he is the very image of that ancestor, he has the same shaped face, the same dark eyes, and is every bit as good-looking," said Katie impressively.

"There was a horrid story about him, though; they say that he discovered his wife was concealing someone in one of the old priests' holes in the house, that he found a man's glove in her bedroom! and killed her in his rage! Flung her out of one of these windows into the moat, and when afterwards it came out, that the man in hiding, was her Roundhead brother, he shot himself in an agony of remorse," said Lulu, quoting verbatim from Mrs. Bunce's oft-told tale.

"It is also said, that they both '*walk*,'" continued Katie with deep gravity. "On moonlight nights, they are to be met with in this very gallery; she, protesting on her knees, and he beside himself with jealous fury. That is her over there, with the satin petticoat and smiling face. Poor soul! she little dreamt of the fate that was in store for her. Fancy her shrieking, and clinging to the window-sill."

"Well! no one could believe anything bad of him, to judge by his *face*," said Helen, rising, and surveying the picture, with steady scrutiny.

"Do you remark, how the eyes follow you everywhere? From whatever point you look at him,—he is staring at you," said Lulu.

"That is a sign of a well-painted portrait," remarked Katie sententiously; "there is nothing supernatural in that! Dear me! how long the evenings are getting, I *feel* as if it were tea-time. I wonder if old Bunce has had any strawberries picked? Supposing we forget all these musty old people, and adjourn downstairs!"

And notwithstanding her little tapping stick, and painful limp, she led the way out of the gallery, at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER VIII

"I CALL it a beastly shame! a mouldy, putrid, shame!" said Lulu, hurrying into the schoolroom, banging the door after her, and addressing her audience, in a loud aggrieved voice.

"Oh, shame! *shame* yourself," said Helen, looking up from painting a bunch of wild flowers, that she and Katie were copying in friendly competition. "What hideous expressions."

"Well! what is it *now?*" asked Katie, as she washed out her brush.

"You know the fancy ball next week?" said Lulu, declaiming dramatically with both hands.

"Are we deaf, and dumb, and blind?" retorted her sister sarcastically. "Have we heard of anything *else* for the last month? Have not our brains been ransacked for suitable characters? Have not our history books,—ancient and modern—made the round of the parish? Are we not heartily *sick* of the whole affair?"

"Well then, what *do* you think?" continued Lulu, resting her elbows on the table, and gazing impressively at the two girls. "Dolly and Blanche have persuaded the Mater, to put up a lot of people for the great event,—and our rooms are wanted——"

"And we are to sleep out in the garden?" interrupted Katie with a laugh. "What a delightful novelty!"

"No, no, no! Mrs. Bunce is to have the honour of our company; we are to be colonized at Cardew for two days, and two nights! Pray what do you think of that?"

"I think it is a splendid idea; and I haven't the smallest objection," replied Katie, after a moment's reflection, "it will be a nice little change, and we will be well out of all the fuss."

"But I do, so want to see the dresses," grumbled Lulu!

"Nonsense," rejoined her sister, "you know there are wardrobes full of old clothes at Cardew, and we will dress you up to your heart's content."

"But the Middletons, and the Vanes, and the Dashwoods are coming," whined Lulu, still unconsoled.

"And if they are, I'm sure I don't want to see them," said her sister; "we shall have far the best of it at Cardew. Plenty of time for making exhaustive searches, hunting up the priests' holes, and meeting the ghosts. It's a golden opportunity, so cheer up! cheer up!"

"I won't sleep by myself, that's certain," declared Lulu defiantly.

"Well, if you're a good girl, you shall sleep with *me*, so there is something to look forward to!" said Helen, looking up with a smile. "And now, my poor broken-hearted Lulu, it is time for you to learn your lessons!"

The great day dawned at last, the date of the Duchess of Dorchester's Fancy Dress Ball, and early in the afternoon, the "Plum Pudding" had conveyed the young people over to Cardew—a motor followed with luggage and maid—where they took possession of two large bedrooms, opening into each other, and made themselves thoroughly at home. The trio had tea in Sir Rupert's especial apartment, "the little library," a sunny room, with wide bay windows facing south, lined with low book-cases, and furnished with severe simplicity. There was a writing-table, a round gate table, a couple of old leather chairs, a few rare prints, lots of pipes over the chimney-piece, and an assortment of

swords and daggers bristling in stars on the walls; tiger and bear-skins strewn about the floor,—essentially a man's sanctum!

After tea they lounged about the terrace, and fed the peacocks, and then, oh sudden happy thought! hurried upstairs, and routed among the old wardrobes and bureaus, for the dresses, and decorations of a bygone age.

"They would all dress up for supper," this was Katie's idea, and it was carried out with enthusiasm, in spite of Helen's remonstrance, that "she could not think of wearing the garments of Sir Rupert's ancestors, —would not dream of taking such a liberty!"

"Ridiculous nonsense!" cried Katie, who was standing amid a heap of old brocades, with a pair of high-heeled slippers in her hand. "Rupert allows us to do exactly as we please with all the old rubbish! We had a lot over at home for our charades, there's enough here to dress the whole county; come, do be quick, and make your choice! For goodness' sake look at Lulu—in the brocade, with pink and blue roses the size of cauliflowers"—pointing to her sister, who by means of flour, cork, and paint, was rapidly transforming herself into a lady of the last century but one,—and intensely interested in her own reflection. "I shall have this brown and gold, with the red petticoat,—and what is your choice?"

"Oh, if I must, I must!" said Helen. "I think this white satin body and train, over the canary-colour petticoat, these funny little shoes, and that bit of old lace, will just complete my costume; no one is to look at anyone, till we are all dressed! Lulu—I've *not* seen you! We meet at supper, is not that the bargain?" and Helen gathered up her finery, and quitted the apartment.

Half an hour later, she made her appearance down-

stairs, walking very slowly into the room, with her train over her arm. She made a deep reverence to the two sisters, whose exclamations of surprise and delight, were warmly echoed by Mrs. Bunce ; who loudly assured Helen that she was for all the world like one of the pictures in the gallery come down out of its frame! Certainly it would have been difficult to find anything prettier to contemplate, than Miss Helen Browne. She wore a low white satin bodice, rounded on her shoulders and finished off with a little lace fichu. The elbow sleeves were also garnished with deep ruffles to match, a long sweeping train was draped over a bright yellow petticoat, which revealed the daintiest little feet in yellow silk stockings, and yellow, very pointed shoes. Her hair was pulled low over her forehead, to imitate the style of coiffure of the time of Charles I. A band of velvet round her wrists and throat, and a bunch of crimson flowers in her bodice, completed the costume.

When supper was over, the three girls played cards ; then they rummaged among the book-shelves, and finally about bedtime began to tell ghost stories. Katie appeared to have any number at her finger-ends, each more grisly, and bloodcurdling than the last,—and she told them well. Meanwhile Lulu sat by, a transfixed listener, with staring eyes, open mouth, and a face expressive of the liveliest apprehension ; but Helen laughed every story to scorn, suggested lobster suppers, nightmare, sleep-walking, robbers, in short, everything but the supernatural! Katie and Lulu being both steadfast believers, were not to be laughed at with impunity ; they became argumentative, hotly indignant, finally very angry !

" Yes, it is all very well to talk," said Katie, with lofty scorn, " one is courageous enough in company, and in a well-lighted room, but if you have the courage

of your opinions, Miss Browne, show it! I challenge you to go alone, and without a light, to the far end of the picture-gallery, and bring me a fan which I left in the window-seat! Come now!" and she rapped the floor with her cane.

"Why not? I accept your challenge with pleasure," said Helen, standing up and pushing back her chair; "if I meet any ghosts, I will give them your love."

As she reached the door, she turned and lightly kissed the tips of her fingers to the two girls, and said in a sepulchral voice:

> "Fare thee well, and if for ever,
> Still for ever,—fare thee well!"

It was a bright moonlight night, and about half-past twelve o'clock, as she sped upstairs, flew along the empty corridors, and clattered down the steps leading to the picture gallery. Patter! patter! patter! went her little high-heeled shoes, all along the polished floor, between the two rows of staring pictures,—some of which were in bright light,—and some in shadow.

"It is certainly rather creepy," she said to herself, "and what a dreadful noise my shoes make, in the still oppressive silence!" Her hand was already stretched out to snatch her prize, when it suddenly dawned upon her highly-strung nerves, that *someone* was standing in the embrasure of the window! A man, with folded arms and a dark resolute face; a man wearing a steel cuirass, and a crimson sash,—in short, one of the pictures! Sir Everard himself! Her heart actually stopped beating for a second,—and then resumed its function in loud audible thumps. Still stretching out her hand to snatch the fan, she was

about to turn, and flee, but was held fast; a grip of iron encircled her wrist, and the figure spoke!

"So we have met at *last*, madam!" it said with slow distinctness!

Helen, trembling like a reed shaken in the wind, was unable to articulate a syllable!

"Whether in the body, or the spirit,—you do not stir from here till you've made known your name, and errand!"

"Release me!" panted Helen, "let me go," vainly struggling to free her hand, "whoever you are you've no right to hold me.—I command you to—to—to release me."

"I will let you go on one condition, my pretty, trembling, little ghost," said the cavalier, gazing down into her face of agonized horror, "whoever you are, you must give me a kiss," drawing her nearer to him.

She looked at him paralysed with fear. Yes, he was the very selfsame Sir Everard, who was said to walk in the gallery,—even to the smallest details of his dress. There could be no possible mistake! As she gazed at him, with eyes nearly glazed with horror, he stooped forward with a smile, and pressed her lips, with his dark moustache.—Strange to say, there was nothing cold or ghostly about this warm *salute*.

"Now you may go," he announced with a gesture of farewell,—and she needed no second bidding.

Three minutes later Helen burst into the library, as if a legion of spectres were in hot pursuit; gasping for breath, and white as her gown, she cast herself into a chair, and holding her hand to her heart, exclaimed:

"I've seen him!"

"Seen *whom?*" cried the two girls in the same breath.

"Seen Sir Everard himself.—He was at the end

of the long gallery; just as I was reaching out for the fan, he seized me by the wrist, oh! it has nearly killed me! Look," she screamed, "there he is again!" and at that moment, the opposite door opened, and the cavalier walked into the room.

"Rupert!" exclaimed his cousins, rushing at him, "who would have expected to see *you* here to-night, and in fancy dress too,—where on earth did you drop from?"

"I have come straight from the ball,—I had enough of it! I can't understand, how fellows long ago could stand these clothes,—this cuirass weighs a ton! My aunt told me that you were all here,—you ought to have been in your beds hours ago!"

"Oh then, so it was *you* who have just given Miss Browne such an awful fright," said Lulu, moving aside, and pointing to where Helen sat, still white, and shattered.

"Pardon me, it was just the other way about," he protested, bowing in her direction. "I was crossing the gallery to go to my own room, when I heard the patter patter of high-heeled shoes, coming down the gallery, and I beheld the white ghost lady, running towards me with the utmost speed! I give you my word, I nearly fainted! However, I am profoundly relieved to find that my terrors had no foundation, and that the murdered lady, is flesh and blood! May I have the honour of an introduction, in the form of a fellow mortal?" he added, looking at Katie. "Please assure your friend, that I am a solid fact."

"Miss Browne, our governess, Sir Rupert Lynn."

Helen made a very faint inclination of her head, she was recovering her self-control, but she was not prepared to forgive Sir Rupert for the awful fright, she had experienced. Her heart was still thumping,—

and then the kiss he had dared to take! At the mere recollection of that very real salute,—the blood mounted to her pale cheeks.

Sir Rupert gazed in incredulous amazement, and then said in his pleasant voice: "I hope you will forgive me, Miss Browne, for the fright I must have given you,—I assure you that it was wholly unintentional." As he spoke he laid aside his broad-leafed Cavalier hat, and took a chair beside her.

"It was partly our fault," announced Katie, "we dressed up this evening for fun, and ransacked all the old wardrobes upstairs, and then from family pictures, we got to talking about ghosts, and Helen declared that she did not believe in them! We had a heated argument, and the end of it was, that we dared her to go up to the end of the picture gallery, and fetch a fan. She accepted the challenge, and with the result you behold!"—pointing at her friend, who lay back in an arm-chair, and still looked ghastly white, and more or less upset.

"I assure you I'm awfully sorry, Miss Browne," said her host, looking her straight in the face, with his handsome dark eyes. "At first I thought you were a ghost; and I was determined to make you 'stand and deliver!' Then when I realized that you were mortal, I imagined you to be some strange girl, who was playing a trick on me,—and I felt bound to pay you out. Will you forgive me?"

"I cannot forgive you *altogether*," said Helen with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes.

"What nonsense, Helen! he only gave you a little fright! How funny that you should meet in such a way! masquerading in fancy dress and in characters, —that are supposed to perform in the picture gallery!"

"Young ladies," exclaimed Mrs. Bunce, opening the door, and speaking in a horrified voice, "is it *possible*, that you are not in your beds hours ago; whatever are you doing sitting up like this? I have been so busy getting Sir Rupert's room aired, that I forgot all about you, till I saw the light under the door, and heard the talking!"

"I've been the means of giving Miss Browne a terrible fright," said Sir Rupert, "she must have some wine, Mrs. Bunce! A glass of that old Madeira."—Helen made a hasty gesture of dissent, and endeavoured to rise.—"Indeed we would all be the better for a little supper. Do you think, you can forage anything out for us from the larder?"

"Well, Sir Rupert, I'll see what I can do. There's cold chicken, and a fruit tart, but I'm sure late suppers, and these hours, are not the thing for Miss Lulu."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Bunce! late supper and late hours will just suit me down to the ground, and I'll come and help you to carry up the things. I expect our maid Martin is in her first sleep!" said Lulu, bounding out of the room like a young kangaroo.

"Now, Rupert, tell me how you came here? where you came from? and what you have been doing?" said Katie, leaning back in her chair, and imperiously gazing at her cousin.

"How I came here, is your first question! I came in a motor, which I hired for the night from the 'King's Head,' Porchester. Where I came from, question number two; I came from the Duchess's ball. I only landed at Southampton three days ago, and as I had a dress and an invitation, I went to this great gathering with some friends from London. I stayed an hour, saw all the most wonderful costumes; saw

your mother, who was overwhelming in her magnificence, and who, by the by, is going to send for all of you to-morrow,—or rather *this* morning! I've had a lot of business to do the last few days, and felt rather played out, so I decided to come home, and turn in; I was not very keen about dancing!"

"Wasn't Bunce in a fine fluster when you walked in?"

"Oh, Bunce is used to it," he answered. "I sent most of my baggage home yesterday; so she had a certain amount of warning, but the poor woman, never knows from hour to hour, or month to month, when I may drop in."

"Was it a good ball?" inquired Katie.

"Yes, it seemed going off all right; wonderful dresses! a group of North American Indians took my fancy, and a bear and his keeper danced together. The bear must have had a rotten time, poor devil! it was awfully hot and crowded. I can't fancy anyone but a maniac, going to a ball in a bear skin, and shuffling about on all fours."

"I suppose Flora Fox was there?"

"I suppose she was," he answered, with a smile. "Hullo! here comes supper at last! Lulu bearing the fruit tart! I say, Lulu! you are not going to have it *all*."

Miss Browne now rose, and declining wine, supper, or any refreshment whatever, took leave of the company and retired,—much to everyone's disappointment.

"Now, Rupert," said Lulu, drawing her chair up close to her cousin with a confidential hitch, "give me a good helping of chicken and the liver and some ham, and tell us, what you think of her?"

"If you are alluding to Miss Browne, I couldn't express any opinion on so short an acquaintance,

beyond this—that she must be a rather remarkable character, to have been your governess for six whole months, and still able to retain her situation, and her *reason!*"

"She's not a bit like what you expected to see, is she?" asked Katie. "You had no idea she would be so young and pretty, had you? and she is twice as nice as she looks; up to all sorts of games and jokes, but all the same, very competent and strict. She keeps Lulu's nose to the grinding stone, I can tell you!"

"Grinding stone yourself," retorted Lulu. "She has managed to put a pretty severe bit in your mouth, my good Katherine; you don't say half the sharp and nasty things you used to do! Don't you think Miss Browne is awfully pretty?" said Lulu, turning to her cousin with a confidential grin.

"I really don't think we ought to discuss Miss Browne in this way," he answered, "Let me tell you about some of the pretty things I've brought you home from Constantinople."

But all the time Rupert Lynn was saying to himself, that Miss Browne was one of the loveliest girls he had ever beheld; and the rôle of governess was an obvious misfit, for a young lady of her age, and distinguished appearance. Who could she be? and where did she come from?

After an interlude, relating to his presents, a few diplomatic questions put him in command of all the facts, that his cousins could tell him, respecting the stranger. She had come from India, their mother had heard of her, through a mutual friend,—she was very accomplished and clever, and altogether, and in every way, a great find!

"How different," said Lulu, "to Miss Meakin, with her red nose and pink eyes! or Mrs. Land, with her

long face, and heavy jaws,—looking like an old bloodhound!"

"And how do Miss Browne and Blanche coalesce?" inquired her cousin with a curious smile.

"Oh! they scarcely ever see each other," replied Katie. "We stay up in the schoolroom, the usual Opposition lot; and Helen very rarely goes to the House of Lords—that is to say, the drawing-room—unless there is company, and she is required to play, and accompany Blanche. She hasn't had much of that lately, as the Mater and Blanche have been in London all the spring, and Dolly too; he was a good riddance. He was always prowling about the schoolroom or the park, and boring us to death. I don't think Helen likes him," she added in a burst of confidence.

To this Sir Rupert made no answer, but mentally remarked, that he was by no means surprised at the intelligence!

"There is two o'clock striking! Girls, you must go to bed," he added authoritatively. "I don't know what your mother would say to me, if she should hear of this midnight debauch."

So, lighting their candles, he politely escorted them into their own corridor, and then made his way into his far distant apartment. As he walked down the long echoing Picture Gallery, he still seemed to see her flying towards him in the moonlight, a high resolve imprinted on her beautiful eager face; she who was occupying an unusual share of his thoughts, who subsequently appeared to him in more than one fantastic dream, "Miss Browne," his cousin's governess!

Acc No 186

CHAPTER IX

THE next morning proved lovely; it was the middle of July, and at nine o'clock the three girls came trooping down to breakfast,—which was laid in the library, close to an open window. A curious old tea equipage (veritable Queen Anne), choice cups and saucers of delicate Crown Derby, hot cakes, home-cured ham, home-made preserves, and fresh eggs, graced the board, and were grouped round a centre-piece, filled with freshly-gathered roses. The host, who was an early riser, was sitting half in and half out of the open window as the young ladies entered. Seen by broad daylight, without his bright cuirass, red sash, and Cavalier hat, he was a slight, handsome young man, with dark eyes, a dark moustache, and a singularly expressive face,—dressed in a light morning suit with a bit of jessamine in his buttonhole. He immediately sprang up, and greeted his cousins cordially, their governess deferentially. As he looked into her eyes, he plainly understood that she had by no means forgotten their little adventure of the previous night. And she too was altered in appearance; instead of white satin, she wore a plain muslin morning dress, her golden brown locks were brushed away from her forehead, and bound into a shining knot, at the back of her head.

Breakfast was by no means as convivial a meal, as supper had been; and in spite of Sir Rupert's valiant endeavour to make conversation general, Miss Browne was as cold as the typical iceberg.

It was a false position; a hateful position, their staying in this young man's house, and being entertained by him. Of course it was accidental,—nevertheless it was exceedingly unpleasant, and as to that scene in the gallery, it simply would not bear contemplation!

After breakfast, they roamed about the place, escorted by Sir Rupert, who paid a visit to the kennels, and released his two setters, Dash and Grouse, and was nearly thrown down by them in the exuberance of their welcome. Then they went to the stables, and saw the two famous hunters, Hero and Huzzar, and so by gradual degrees, they made their way into the grounds and into the garden, and Helen in spite of herself was drawn into the conversation, and found it impossible to resist the seduction of Sir Rupert's manner; he was so natural and frank, on such brotherly terms with her companions,—how could she maintain a stolid sulky silence?

It is not always a heavenly summer morning, one is not always young and in the company of other young people, in a delightful old garden, full of such flowers and fruit, that it looked as if it were imported direct from Fairyland. They visited the fish-ponds and fed the fish, they loitered and dawdled about for nearly two hours, and then Katie seating herself on the bottom step of a shallow flight, commanded her cousin to take Miss Browne to see the haunted tree, as she was too tired to walk another step, and Lulu had gone into the house for another supply of bread for the fish.

In spite of Helen's disclaimer "that it would do another time" and that one tree was much like another, she was led away by her host, conducted down the steps and along a shady walk, where branching limes

interlaced their arms overhead, and almost shut out the sunlight. This was called the "Lovers' Walk," and surely no pair of lovers, who ever breathed out vows of eternal constancy, or paced arm-in-arm beneath these old trees, were more goodly to look on, than the couple who now came down from the terrace, and passed into the cool shadow. They walked in deep meditation, for at least three minutes, and at last he spoke.

"Miss Browne," he said, glancing at her, "I am glad to have a moment with you alone, to ask you to forgive me for my little mistake last night!"

To this Miss Browne made no reply.

"It was entirely unintentional," he pleaded. "I hadn't the remotest idea who you were."

"If you will promise never to speak of it again," broke in Helen, "I will do my best to—to—to forget it. Yes! I will endeavour to forget," she added tremulously.

"That's more than I shall do," he rashly admitted. "I shall never forget, but if I have your forgiveness, I can bear the recollection with fortitude."

"Sir Rupert!" exclaimed Helen hastily. "Are you taking advantage of my position in your aunt's house, to speak to me in a manner you wouldn't dare to do, to a girl you might consider your equal?"

"You quite mistake me, Miss Browne," he answered quietly. "I don't know about the word 'dare,' but I certainly would not care, to make the same speech to any of the young ladies of my acquaintance, and in my opinion, you are their equal in every sense of the word. If I have offended you, forgive me!"

Once again Helen made no reply, and walked on in silence.

"Here is the tree," he said, as they came out of

the avenue, and found themselves near a wide-spreading and very bright copper beech.

"The legend is, that a murder was committed underneath this tree, and that from being an ordinary green beech, it instantly took the colour of a reddish copper, but I cannot vouch for the truth of this statement," he added with a smile.

"Well, have you made up your mind? Are you going to forgive me?" he proceeded. "Come, Miss Browne, I did not think you would be so hard to convince; you had much better be on good terms with *me*, as when I am at home, I spend half my time in the schoolroom at Thornhurst."

"You will have to obtain my permission now," she replied, a smile stealing round the corner of her lips. "I allow no idling."

"I promise never to intrude uninvited, if you will be friends! Come, now," holding out his hand, "I am making an immense concession; it is to be peace, is it not?"

"Well, a truce at any rate," she replied, touching his hand with hers. Alas! at what an unfortunate moment, just as Mrs. Despard and Blanche were rolling up the avenue, in their luxurious landaulette.

"Mamma, did you see that?" cried Blanche, starting into an upright position.

"What?" asked her mother snappishly.

"Rupert and Miss Browne standing near the beech tree, hand in hand," she announced with tragic solemnity.

"Impossible!" exclaimed the matron, now thoroughly roused. "Quite out of the question,—it must have been Katie. I have always found Miss Browne a singularly well-conducted young person; she is most retiring and unassuming, and scarcely ever

speaks to Dolly, and that she and Rupert could already have made such strides towards familiarity is simply preposterous!"

"Well, seeing is believing," said her daughter acrimoniously. "I am sure I recognize Miss Browne's white hat, with the black bows. Look back, who are those people walking across the grass?" she asked imperiously. "The girl is not Katie; for she does not limp; it is not Lulu, for she doesn't wear short petticoats, who do you suppose it is?"

"Bless my soul," ejaculated her mother, with unusual vehemence. "I can hardly believe my eyes, yes! it is Rupert and Miss Browne, and they are alone!"

CHAPTER X

SIR RUPERT and Helen were not long in reaching the motor, which had been suddenly brought to a full stop in the avenue. Mrs. Despard greeted her governess with a frigid inclination of the head, and a look that spoke volumes of amazement and displeasure,—a look that was also reflected in her daughter's countenance. Miss Despard gave Helen one rapid and indignant glance from under her sunshade, and then turned a radiant face upon her good-looking kinsman. He received a warm, nay, an effusive greeting from the two ladies, and was plied with a running fire of questions, as he stood by the car with his hand on the door. Rupert Lynn had not been knocking about the world for twenty-nine years for nothing; he had seen and interpreted the glances of disapproval that had been levelled at poor Miss Browne,

who was standing at the other side of the car, pale and downcast,—a wholly ignored cipher.

"Go into the house, and see that the girls get ready at once, Miss Browne," commanded Mrs. Despard, speaking to Helen for the first time, in a tone of voice that made her tremble.

No sooner had the girl set out upon her errand, than turning to her nephew, Mrs. Despard said:

"It was really *too* bad of me, to quarter the schoolroom upon you, Rupert, but you know you gave us *carte blanche* to make use of Cardew, and we had such a house-party for the ball, that we quite overflowed! I needn't say we never expected you home; I was electrified to see you last night! Imagine all the talk there would be in the neighbourhood, if the neighbours were to hear, you had been entertaining two young ladies!"

"Three young ladies," corrected Sir Rupert, quietly.

"Ah! and by the way, what do you think of her," inquired Blanche, with well-assumed nonchalance, twirling round as she spoke, the handle of her parasol, and fixing upon her cousin's face, a pair of eagle-keen little grey eyes.

"You mean Miss Browne?" he asked with studied indifference.

"Of course, I mean Miss Browne, you don't think I was alluding to Lulu or Katie," returned Blanche, without removing her gaze from his face.

"Good-looking in a certain style," put in her mother condescendingly, "but not the type of face *I* admire."

"Good-looking in a certain style, as you say," responded Sir Rupert equably, "but I have scarcely seen her."

(Oh! Sir Rupert!)

"And by the way, my dear aunt, won't you come

into the house, and send the car round ?—Come in and have lunch ? " he urged.

" On no account, Rupert," she answered with a gesture of dismay. " Flora Fox is coming to us this afternoon, and we must return at once. You had better accompany us,—there's plenty of room,—remember, my dear boy, we have seen nothing of you for nearly six months ! "

Mrs. Despard's offer was diplomatically declined, but her nephew spent the ensuing twenty minutes, leaning his arms on the side of the car, and conversing with his aunt and cousin to such good purpose, that ere Katie came limping down the steps,—accompanied by her maid,—and the " Plum Pudding " appeared in the distance, they were restored to complete amiability, and the little cloud that had arisen on the horizon, was entirely dispersed,—as far as Sir Rupert was concerned. He had promised with unusual readiness, to spend a great deal of his time at Thornhurst, to join the local tennis club, to play in the impending cricket week, and in short,—as his aunt expressed it—" to make himself generally useful."

She took Lulu and a maid with her in the car, leaving Helen and Katie to occupy the pony carriage,—which she dispatched on its journey, before she started. Even her inquisitorial eye failed to detect anything, but formal politeness in the good-bye between her nephew and Miss Brownie. There were no blushes, and no embarrassments on her side,—no empressement on his. Yes, her mind was profoundly relieved. Mrs. Despard gave a sigh of deep-drawn satisfaction, as she beheld the little trap containing the two girls bowling away down the avenue, and presently lost to sight.

She and her eldest daughter subjected the unhappy Lulu to the torture of incessant and probing questions

all the way home; but nothing in any way likely to confirm her first suspicions, was to be elicited, from that very wideawake, and sagacious minx.

No! Miss Browne did not stay to supper,—there were only Katie and herself. Miss Browne and Rupert had scarcely spoken to one another, and they merely went to see the red beech, because Katie sent them. They did not want to go one little bit; thus spoke Lulu with an air of lamb-like innocence.

"I should have thought Miss Browne had seen the red beech long ago," said Blanche. "I'm sure you are always poking about over here, and she must have the whole place at her fingers' ends."

"We generally poke about in the garden," replied Lulu; "we can never go very far, on account of Katie," and this reply was accepted as conclusive.

* * * * * *

"It is as well to be on one's guard," confided Mrs. Despard to her favourite daughter. "I won't have Miss Browne downstairs with all these young men coming in, and out. There is no knowing what ridiculous ideas she might get into her head!"

"Nor they into theirs," amended Miss Blanche, as she and her mother sat together after dinner,—imbued with the open-heartedness and expansiveness, which is frequently the result of a daintily served, and well-appreciated meal.

"Why do you keep her, Mother?" she asked with a little frown. "You can see perfectly well that she's too good-looking for the post. Although you and I don't admire her,—other people do. Dolly and father are always praising her, and her charming manners, and her singing,—such stuff! A governess is not engaged

to charm one's father and brothers, but to *teach!* It would be a nice thing now, if Dolly were to fall in love with her!—and you know what an idiot he is about a pretty face. It would never do with Flora Fox coming. Are you listening, Mother? It would never do for Dolly to fall in love with a governess!"

"Or Rupert," supplemented her mother, with a meaning look, that brought a wave of brilliant colour to her daughter's cheeks.

For an instant, she made no reply; and at last she said in a tone of peevish inquiry: "Then why don't you get rid of her? Can anything be more simple—give her a month's notice!"

"My dear, I've turned it over in my mind more than once, and I find that such a step is out of the question," replied her mother in a melancholy voice.

"Out of the question?" repeated Miss Blanche in a key of indignant surprise. "What *do* you mean?"

"Simply that your father won't *hear* of it,—he says——"

"Such nonsense; I'd make him hear of it," interrupted his daughter with angry vehemence.

"He says, that Miss Browne has wonderful influence with Lulu; has softened, improved and tamed her, in a manner that is marvellous; and I must admit that she *has* worked wonders within the last six months," added Mrs. Despard with unwilling commendation.

"And what else does he say?" snapped Blanche.

"He says, that Katie is devoted to Miss Browne, and that on her account, as well as Lulu's, she is to remain here as long as she will be good enough to stay. That she is a clever, amiable, modest young woman, and that the longer she remains under his roof, as the companion of his two youngest daughters, the better he will be pleased!"

"Well! I am sure!" ejaculated Blanche. "*How* she must have flattered him!"

"And you know how obstinate your father can be, when he takes things into his head," continued Mrs. Despard. "He swears, that if we make it unpleasant for her—did you ever hear of such an idea?—or interfere with her comfort, or in any way compel her to leave,—that he will shut up the town house, and leave *you*, to teach Lulu. He says, we've had so many governesses, that we have become a proverb in the neighbourhood, and that there is nothing whatever against Miss Browne—but her good looks, and that she *shall* stay! Hush! here he is," she added apprehensively, as the hum of voices was heard, and the door was thrown open, and admitted the master of the house, and several of his guests.

Sir Rupert kept his promise, and rode over to Thornhurst, twice a week. On former occasions the schoolroom had been one of his favourite haunts; many a time had he shared his cousins' substantial early tea, in preference to the elegantly served function in the drawing-room; but these raids, were in the days of elderly Miss Richards, lumpish Fräulein Müller, and red-nosed Miss Scott. Now things were entirely changed, an impassable, though imperceptible wall had been erected between him, and his younger cousins. Once or twice, he had bravely announced his intention of paying them a visit; but he was always put off with some plausible excuse. Either the girls were busy, and must not be interrupted; or they had gone down to the village; or Miss Browne had taken them to make a sketch in the park; and Sir Rupert instinctively felt, that although these manifold reasons were probably so many pretty little fictions, he was powerless to withstand his aunt.

Still, he saw her in church every Sunday, and sometimes managed with rare dexterity to secure a word or a handshake in the porch. Yes! it had come to this, Miss Browne was "Her" to him, the one, the only one, that ever had been,—that ever was to be!

It was in vain, that he had argued and reasoned with his inner man; had assured himself, that he, Rupert Lynn, who had seen, and passed scathless through the most brilliant circles in the capitals of Europe, should come home to his own poverty-stricken halls, and fall foolishly, imprudently, and hopelessly in love with his aunt's governess; a girl without money, without family, without friends! It was incredible! and yet, it was a stubborn fact.

What is hard to win, what is seldom seen, is ever the most prized! Little did Mrs. Despard dream, that in rigidly immuring her pretty governess, she was nursing and fanning, a little stray spark from Cupid's torch, that if left to be blown about by the winds of circumstance, might have died out. Now it had become a bright inextinguishable flame.

In his constant rides over to Thornhurst, Sir Rupert was ever buoyed up with the hope of a chance meeting with Miss Browne, and his cousins (his cousins were immaterial), but he was invariably doomed to disappointment. Vainly he gazed on the shrubbery walks, up the glades among the plantations, along the lanes, and fields, and roads.

Mrs. Despard was a wary, clear-headed woman; in these days, the dear girls went out in the morning,—it was much the best time of day, such a pity to spend all the early hours indoors, moping over books and water-colours; so between eleven and one o'clock, Helen and her companions took their walks abroad, took their walks at a time, when there was no fear of

their encountering a good-looking cavalier on a handsome bay thoroughbred, cantering gaily across the park.

And how was Helen getting on? "Very well indeed," she would have assured you. She had acquired the entire affection, and confidence of her pupils—her cousins—she was contented with her humble lot, and happy; their lives were quiet and uneventful, for they lived entirely apart from the great whirlpool of gaiety, that existed beside them. Constant were the dinners, the tennis parties, and the little informal dances; but Helen had never been bidden to join in any of these pleasures. She would have been scarcely human, had she been able to suppress a sigh, or an occasional pang of envy, as imprisoned in the schoolroom, those sunny afternoons, deep in dry German exercises, or still drier arithmetic, she saw car after car arrive full of gaily dressed ladies, and men,—and not a few bicycles and runabouts, bearing the lords of creation to one of Mrs. Despard's far-famed tennis parties. How pretty the scene was, the white and coloured figures strolling from terrace to terrace, or sauntering under the trees. The hard fought games of tennis played by slim active young girls, and flannel garbed men; the long tables set out in the shade, covered with dazzling silver, gay flowers, and all that was *recherché* in the way of ices and refreshment,—and to crown all, the band! How could any girl give lessons, with a string band in her ears, and a crowd of attractive novelties, parading before her eyes?

"It's not a bit of good doing lessons to-day! Not a little bit," said Katie, limping into the room where her sister and her governess were now battling with "Wallenstein." "Come into my den, and give yourselves up to the pleasures of the moment; come and see the fun!"

"I really think we *must* take a holiday," agreed Helen, who had been resolutely sitting with her back to the window, and endeavouring to nail her attention and Lulu's, to the book before her,—and the sorrows of Max and Theckla.

"Come, Lulu, we will put them away for to-day," commencing to shovel up the books, and straighten affairs, before accepting Katie's invitation.

Katie's den was her hobby; it opened off the schoolroom, it was there, that they enjoyed their leisure moments, and played games. It overlooked the grounds, and was one of the sunniest rooms in the house, one of the prettiest as well; being embellished by Katie's taste, and her father's purse. There was a handsome grand piano, low bookcases, full of valuable books, a rose-coloured Persian carpet, an Empire writing-table, and a delicious lounge,—all so many gifts from Katie's devoted parent. Katie was twenty years of age; "she had no occasion to be taken about, and shown off in the great mart of fashion—poor child!" said Mr. Despard, "and she should have all her little fancies indulged in at home."

Mrs. Despard made no objection; she and Blanche being somewhat afraid of Katie's searching eyes, and sarcastic speeches, were the last to object to her absence from their company; indeed, Mrs. Despard was not a little ashamed of her lame daughter; and only too thankful that she should keep herself in the background as much as possible. Katie's extreme sensitiveness was not long in discovering this unpleasant truth, and she rarely joined the family circle.

"Now, Helen," she said, "draw up a chair to the window, and as the showman says, 'you shall see what you shall see!' Lulu, you can kneel in front. There's

mother over there under the cedar, receiving, and Blanche acting as an aide-de-camp, in her new green costume,—she thinks green becomes her! I don't! That gown came from Doucet, and cost thirty guineas, what do you think of it?"

"It looks nothing; not a bit better than her last winter's gown, and I shall tell her so," said Lulu with malignant triumph. "Who has she got hold of now? Oh! Lord Leatherhead, and there is mother bowing, and smiling away to Lady Leatherhead!"

"Featherbed, she ought to be," interposed Katie. "Did you ever see such a figure? she must weigh twenty stone! She broke down the sofa the last time she was here. Ah! now mother is guiding her to an iron garden seat,—*that* ought to support her!"

"Do you see Flora Fox," said Lulu, with animation, "over there near the tennis, talking to Dolly? What a pretty frock. She certainly knows how to dress, does she not, Katie?"

"If she was as careful about her h's, as she is about her dress, she would do."

"You don't mean to say that she drops them?" said Helen aghast, looking over at a very smart little figure, that was chattering to Dolly with much gesticulation.

"Not in everyday life," returned Katie, "but when she is on her company manners, and gets angry or excited, and lets herself go, then she talks of 'orses, and 'ome, and 'ouse."

"She has heaps of money," said Lulu, "and no brothers or sisters. Some day she will be our sister,—for she is to marry Dolly."

"You may well say 'some day,'" responded Katie. "I will believe in that engagement when I see it. Ah! here is Rupert at last!" as their cousin appeared

crossing the pleasure grounds with another man whom he presented to his aunt, and Blanche. Then stood aloof, eagerly eyeing every group, but apparently his search was unsuccessful. He strolled from one party to another, exchanging a few words here, an animated greeting there, but halting nowhere,—still evidently in quest of someone.

"Who *can* Rupert be looking for?" exclaimed Katie, at last. "I declare he is like a dog in a fair! Do you see? he has gone all round the tennis ground, now he has turned down that shady walk, where he will certainly find himself *de trop*,—now, he is coming this way. Why, I declare, he is making for the house," she added, with a smile, for having caught sight of three faces in the window, he paused, raised his hat, and bent his steps towards the entrance. Two minutes later he was shaking hands with each in turn, had put away his hat and stick, and seated himself, as if he had come to make a prolonged visit.

"What ages it is since we have seen you," said Katie, "what has become of you? You never condescend to come near us now,—I suppose Miss Browne has frightened you?"

"When Fräulein Müller did not dismay me, you cannot suppose that I would fear Miss Browne!" he answered with a laugh.

"Then why do you cut us? why have you never been to see us?" reiterated Lulu imperiously.

"I'm sure I can't tell you," he replied, looking slightly embarrassed. And he was right, he certainly could *not* inform them of the reason of his unavoidable, and most unwilling absence.

"Now I'm here, of course you're going to give me tea," he said, craftily turning the conversation.

"Tea here with us, when you are one of the

distinguished guests *là-bas*!" cried Katie, with well-affected horror. "What will mother, and Blanche, say?"

"Shall I ring for it?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"You may if you like, and we will tell Cater to bring us some nice little dainty,—a few of the crumbs from the feast."

"Do you never go out in the afternoon now?" inquired her cousin. "I haven't seen the Plum Pudding for ages."

"No, mother has taken it into her head, to send us out in the morning,—between eleven and one."

"Oh! then that accounts for it," he said, half to himself. "Miss Browne," addressing Helen, "is your discipline so strict and severe that you never allow your pupils to leave the park? They have not been over to Cardew since I came home. They have not even paid their 'visit of digestion,' and ceremony!"

"It is rather far," stammered Helen; "the pony is fed at twelve o'clock, we are not supposed to use him in the morning,—for sometimes, he takes a turn in the lawn-mower."

"Is there no such thing as a half-holiday under the present regime?" inquired Sir Rupert.

"Do you remember the gipsy tea we had this time last year, Lulu? and the awful condition of your best Sunday frock?"

"Don't, Rupert! every rose has its thorn. I never heard the end of *that*,—but we had a most lovely time. I'll tell you what," she continued between two sips of tea. "I have an idea."

"You don't mean it!—Let's have it at once!"

"Do you know, that Helen,—I mean Miss Browne—has never been to a dance in England? Mother has never once asked her downstairs!"

"My dear Lulu," protested Helen with a bright colour in her cheeks, "how *can* you say such things?"

"But she never has," persisted Lulu, totally unabashed.

"Certainly not, why should she? Governesses are not supposed to go to people's houses to be amused, and danced with. My business, is in the schoolroom,—and I shouldn't dream of expecting your mother to number me among her guests," declared Helen with some warmth, and a still further accession of colour. "Of course you *know* Lulu?" turning to Sir Rupert apologetically; "she doesn't in the least mean, what she says!"

"Now, Lulu, we are all attention, let us have your *idea*," said her cousin, standing up to carry Helen's teacup, and making no reply to her last remark.

"Well!" replied Lulu, tossing back her mane, and clearing her throat, "my idea, Rupert, is, that you should give a ball or a dance of some kind!"

"A ball!" gasped Katie; "why on earth should Rupert give a ball?"

"Why shouldn't he?" retorted her sister, "or a nice afternoon dance. Dancing in the hall, band in the little gallery, refreshments in the library, promenading in the grounds,—and fireworks."

"And in the name of folly, why fireworks?" he asked.

"Oh! because *I* should like them!"

"Then you propose to honour me with your company, if I gave this afternoon dance?"

"To be sure I would," she answered emphatically; "the first to arrive; the last to depart."

"Well, if Miss Browne and Katie will do me the same favour, I will give the dance, so there's a bargain."

"You know of course it's all nonsense, Sir Rupert. Lulu is only joking," said Helen gravely.

"But *I* am not joking. I will give an afternoon dance, and you will come," speaking directly to Helen, "and bring Lulu?"

"It will depend on Mrs. Despard," she replied; "I can make no promise; and it is not probable, that I shall be able to go."

"But you would like to go; you know you would," said Katie. "You told me, you adored dancing, and you've not had one holiday since you came here."

"Then you will come, I'll make it all right with my aunt," said Sir Rupert, with an air of unwonted resolution; and, "I shall expect you not only to come, Miss Browne; but to give me two dances."

"Oh! you dear delightful Rupert!" cried Lulu, casting herself into his arms. "Won't you make mother let me go too? She will do anything for you,—and won't you dance with *me*?"

"Of course I will, Lulu; the Highland fling, the Irish jig, anything you like; and now I see the people moving and I must be off. Good-bye, Lulu, good-bye, Katie, good-bye, Miss Browne; please don't forget our two dances," and in another moment he was gone.

"Miss Browne, don't you think Rupert nice,—tremendously nice?" said Lulu, when the door was closed behind him.

"Oh, Lulu," ignoring the question, "how could you go on in such a way? What did you mean by asking your cousin to give a dance,—you made me feel thoroughly ashamed of you!"

"Because I wanted you to go to some dance; and I knew if Rupert gave one, he'd be sure to ask you,—for he likes you! Now he hated Fräulein Müller like poison."

"So Rupert is to give a dance at Cardew, next week," remarked Blanche, as she sailed into Katie's room an hour later; "he invited half the people who were here this evening. What can have put such an idea into his head?" walking up to the glass, and smiling consciously at her own reflection.

"Not you at any rate!" replied Lulu, rudely; "that grand new dress of yours is hideously unbecoming! Fine feathers do not always make fine birds."

"Better to be a bird of any kind,—than a little *beast* like you!" returned her sister angrily, "and oh! by the way, Miss Browne,"—as if apropos of beasts,—"it is a pity, you were not down to-day, there was a gentleman here with Colonel Woodford, who said he knew you out in India. He was sorry not to have seen you! Mamma was going to send for you, but I told her, you would not care about coming,—you would find yourself in such an awkward position."

"A very awkward position indeed," thought Helen; a position that overwhelmed her to dwell on! Her cousin Blanche was far from guessing, and equally far from supposing, that for once in her life, she had done Miss Browne a good turn!

CHAPTER XI

TWO or three evenings later, Mr. Despard expressed a desire that his daughter Katie and Miss Browne should come to the drawing-room, and be present at a large musical party. It was in vain, that his wife combated his wishes.

"Katie was not well; she was shy, she hated society, she was ten times happier upstairs."

"If she is shy, and hates society, it is because she never goes into it; it is merely the dislike of the *unknown*. She is a very clever well-read girl, and I shall insist on her coming out more—and letting herself be seen."

"Letting herself be seen?" repeated his wife sarcastically.

"Yes, Madam," responded her husband, "be seen, and there won't be a prettier girl in the room, than my poor lame Katie. You keep her mewed upstairs in such a way, that people are beginning to say that she is an idiot,—and Miss Browne is her keeper! But they shall both be on view—no deception—and that's as sure as my name is Horace Despard."

It was not often that the master of the house took such a high hand, but when he did, he was bound to have his way,—and his wife recouped herself in other directions. She suffered the question of Katie to pass without further discussion; but long and desperate was the struggle she made to keep the governess upstairs,—and the struggle was in vain. Miss Browne received a polite little note requesting the pleasure of her company, written by the reluctant hand of her very unwilling hostess, at the dictation, on this occasion, of her lord and master!

"Now, Helen, you must look your best!. What are you going to wear?" inquired Katie, coming into her room the afternoon of the great day. "Show me your dress,—show me your finery."

"I have nothing but this," she replied, pointing to a black gown which lay on the bed. This was the elegant French model (reduced), which she had bought the day after her arrival in London,—not anticipating her impending poverty.

"It will do," said Katie, turning it over with a

critical hand, "it looks well made, and so soft and filmy. It you will take pains with your hair, and wear a piece of black velvet round your neck,—you will look all right."

And Helen did look all right, that evening, even to Mr. and Mrs. Despard, who stared with incredulous amazement, as this elegantly dressed governess entered the drawing-room, and indeed many eyes were turned upon the beautiful girl in black. The Despard family were beset with questions, numbers asked for introductions, to which requests, Mrs. and Miss Despard, turned deaf or indifferent ears.

Now that Helen was proclaimed a beauty, by the voice of public opinion, Dolly,—with the mean vanity of a small mind,—became disagreeably assiduous in his attentions,—attentions that were hateful to Helen, and alarming to his mother,—whose temper had been sorely warped by Miss Browne's success,—and who vowed to herself over and over again, that this was the first and last time the girl should grace her drawing-room! Most of the men had no eyes for anyone else in the room,—notably Rupert, who had ousted Dolly from his place, and was sitting in the shadow of the window seat talking to the governess with the greatest animation, looking so different to the bored individual, he had lately appeared to be, when in the society of ladies.

On one point the hostess had made up her mind. Miss Browne should not sing; she had a lovely voice, and would still further ensnare these infatuated men were she suffered to advertise this accomplishment.

There had been some music already: Mr. Montero, a renowned pianist, had given a brilliant rendering of Chopin, the great tenor of the neighbourhood had sung two songs, Miss Despard and Miss Fox had executed

a feeble duet, when to the dismay of the hostess, she heard her husband loudly inquiring for "Miss Browne?"

"Where's Miss Browne, you should just hear *her* sing," he said in a voice that was the reverse of complimentary to the late performance. Hurrying to Miss Browne, who was rising from the piano—she played all the accompaniments—she whispered so audibly that Sir Rupert involuntarily heard, "Miss Browne, I do not wish you to sing. If you are asked, refuse! You understand me!"

"Certainly," Helen replied with a little bow, and a deep blush, as she moved aside.

"But, my dear Aunt, why should we not have the pleasure of hearing Miss Browne sing?" inquired her nephew suavely.

Stung beyond the limits of patience, at finding he had overheard her request, she answered in a low, but distinct voice:

"Because this drawing-room is only intended for the display of my friends' accomplishments. Miss Browne's sphere and Miss Browne's proper place is the schoolroom," and she moved swiftly away.

Helen's eyes filled with unbidden tears at this unkind and uncalled-for little speech. She retired from the piano and sought a far distant seat, in the neighbourhood of Katie,—but here she was immediately followed by Sir Rupert, in a state of suppressed indignation.

"Why does my aunt not wish you to sing?" he asked, drawing up a chair beside her. "What can be her reason?"

"I do not know; but please do not say anything about it,—you were not intended to overhear what she said!"

"But I did hear, and some day I shall come up

to the schoolroom, and you will sing me a song, won't you? in your own sphere, as my aunt calls it."

"No, no, you must never come to the schoolroom again. Mrs. Despard heard of your visit the other day, and was greatly displeased. You must please never come again,—unless you wish to get me into dreadful trouble."

"I am the last person in the world, who would wish to do that!" he said significantly. "Nevertheless I am determined to hear you sing some day." After a pause, he continued: "I'm afraid you are not very happy here; in some ways my aunt is a peculiar woman, has funny old feudal ideas; and the life of a governess must be a hard one. This is your first attempt, your first situation, is it not?"

In his eyes there was nothing but friendly, and anxious solicitude.

"Yes! this is 'my first place,' as the servant would say,—I came almost straight here from board ship."

"You must find it rather a change from India,—I understand you lived in India, I've always been interested in the gorgeous East. What sort of a life did you lead out there?" he inquired, drawing a little closer, as though to invite her confidence.

"I—I—would rather not talk of India,—it is a very painful subject," said Helen, looking down, with a rising colour.

"Then you have no friends there now, I suppose?"

"None," replied Helen, "indeed I have hardly any friends in England, I am almost alone here."

"May I be reckoned as a friend, Miss Browne? more than a friend?"

"Rupert, will you take Lady Daley in to supper," said a high acrid voice, with startling suddenness, and Miss Despard, looking unusually white, stood

before the sofa,—upon which half the eyes in the room had been riveted during the last five minutes. Sir Rupert Lynn was making wonderful running with the Despards' pretty governess!

Miss Fox had drawn Blanche's attention to the *tête-à-tête;* she and Blanche were, as we have heard, "bosom friends"—as much friends as any two girls can be, who are both in love with the same man.—The scene before them, aroused their indignation and jealousy, and they were quite ready to make common cause against this common enemy.

"What, is it supper-time already?" said Sir Rupert. "But, my dear Blanche, why should I take in old Lady Daley? She would much rather go in with some old fogey of her own time of life, than me! Why may not I have the pleasure of escorting Miss Browne?"

"Because in the first place, rank goes with rank," responded Blanche in a crushing tone, "and in the second place, there is no room for Miss Browne at table. It is a sit-down supper," she said, turning to Helen, "and a much tighter fit than we expected. I am sorry we cannot squeeze you in. We will send you something up to the schoolroom."

"Pray do not trouble," said Helen hastily, rising as she spoke. "I do not want supper and I am going now."

"Excuse me for one moment," said Sir Rupert. "You received an invitation to this entertainment, did you not; you did not come uninvited, I am sure?"

"No, Mrs. Despard sent me a little note yesterday morning."

"And yet you are debarred from the piano, and the supper-table. I must confess my aunt has strange ideas of hospitality!"

"Rupert! that isn't the way to speak of Mamma,"

protested Blanche angrily. "Now do please go and take in old Lady Daley at once."

"No, my dear Blanche, I shall not intrude any longer; as there is such a squeeze, you will be thankful to have my place for someone. Good-night, Miss Browne; good night, Blanche"—and he walked away, and disappeared among the crowd, already setting supperwards.

* * * * * *

Helen lost no time in hurrying up to her own apartment. First of all she locked her door, then she sat down and enjoyed a really good cry,—but being of an elastic temperament, after a little time, she dried her eyes, and began her usual, and indeed only means, of soothing her excited mind, by walking up and down the bare boards of her room from end to end. She had had a hard life in many ways during the last six months, but most of the hardships were to be traced to herself. It was her own fault, in the first instance; this sailing under false colours; bitterly, bitterly, had she repented her mad project; begun as a joke, ending in death, and misery. However she had gained some things. For instance the affection of her two younger cousins,—entirely on her own merits. Had she come among them as the rich Helen Browne, she could never have known them, as she did now,—no, nor her aunt and Blanche! She was painfully aware of the intrinsic value of their good opinion. Little did they dream, that the slighted and detested governess, was their wealthy Australian kinswoman.

CHAPTER XII

MISS DESPARD hastened to her mother, who was already *en route* for the dining-room, on the arm of a County Magnate, and whispered to her the astounding intelligence, that Rupert had left the house in a rage, because Miss Browne was not going in to supper, and had deserted Lady Daley, who was sitting alone on a distant sofa, looking bombs, and liquid fire! If anything *could* have added fuel to Mrs. Despard's temper, this speech would have done so, for she was already in a highly volcanic condition,—a condition which the laws of society alone enabled her to restrain from an immediate eruption.

And after all Rupert had not returned home! In crossing the hall he had seen Katie, limping painfully up the staircase, and had hurried after her to offer his arm.

"Are *you* going off without supper too?" he asked, as he joined her.

"Yes, mother said I was to slip away,—as soon as the people had left the drawing-room," she replied, as she hobbled into her own sitting-room. "You see, as long as I'm *sitting down* mother doesn't mind," she added pitifully, "but once I begin to move about, mother cannot endure me in her sight,—and she didn't wish people to see me limping in to supper, and I'm sure I did not want to go," passing her hand wearily across her forehead. "Where is Miss Browne?"

"Miss Browne was not expected at supper either."

"Oh, Rupert! you don't mean it," cried Katie, aghast,

"I assure you it is a painful fact. I heard Blanche giving Miss Browne your mother's message!"

"How could she, how dare she treat her in such a way?" cried Katie with scarlet cheeks. "I know Helen won't stand it, I'm sure she will leave us," suddenly bursting into tears. "Mother detests her, but she cannot dismiss her, because father thinks so much of Helen,—but I see she intends to *force* her to go, and Helen is the only real friend I've ever had," concluded Katie, burying her face in her handkerchief, and sobbing hysterically.

"Why are you so fond of her, Katie?" asked Sir Rupert, drawing up a chair. "Tell me, Kitty."

"Oh! because of ever so many things," she answered, wiping her eyes; "she enters into one's feelings, she is so good-tempered, and unselfish, and interested in the things I like! Books, water-colours, embroidery,—we have ever so many tastes in common. She is not a bit like Blanche, and her lot, who smoke, and gossip, and gamble on the sly,—and talk of nothing but clothes, and men!—and who look upon *me*, as if I were a sort of domestic gorilla,—because I am helpless, and lame."

It was seldom that Katie alluded to her infirmity, and never before, to Rupert,—although he had been like a brother to her and Lulu. She was very fond of him, and knew of his many good deeds, and thoughtful kindnesses among his poor neighbours round Cardew! She knew him not only as her handsome and popular cousin, but as a just and liberal master, an upright chivalrous gentleman, and a firm friend.

"Katie," he said suddenly, "I'm going to tell you a secret, and you are the only person in the wide world to whom I will confide it. Ah! here comes your maid with a nice little supper for you," as Katie's special

attendant entered, bearing a tray with soup, various delicate morsels, and a half-pint bottle of champagne!

"Now, you must have something to drink at once," he said, pouring out a glass of Jules Mumm, and handing it to his pale cousin. "Eat some of this nice hot quail; you look thoroughly done up! and I insist upon your having some supper,—we can talk by and by."

"And what about your great secret, Rupert?" inquired Katie, when she had become more composed, and had nibbled at some of the good things, with which her cousin had heaped her plate.

"What would you think, supposing you were to lose Miss Browne, as your governess,—of taking her on as a cousin?"

"A cousin!" exclaimed Katie, laying down her fork; "what on earth do you mean? Oh!" suddenly struck by something in her companion's face, "but, Rupert! oh, *Rupert*—you would not—oh no; it would never do, never!"

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because there are thousands of reasons; you are Sir Rupert Lynn of Cardew, and she is only a poor governess without a halfpenny in the world,—without birth or connections. She seems to have scarcely any friends, and, strange to say, no correspondence in India, where she came from. All her letters are from Australia; I know this, because the hall boy collects foreign stamps, and she gives them to him,—she is very close and reserved about her concerns, and I don't think, she has a penny beyond what she earns, and you know, that you must marry somebody with *heaps* of money!"

"I know, that I won't do that, Miss Katie of the solemn face, and sage counsel. I intend to marry Miss

Browne, if she will have me! I am poor too; and proud,—and have no intention of looking for a rich wife, as has been so urgently recommended. I should hate to live on my wife's money, and ten to one she would despise me, as a mean-spirited slacker, who sold my old name, and home, for so many solid thousands per annum. And after all, why should I not please myself? I am my own master. Miss Browne is a lady, wherever she came from, whether India, or Australia, —I don't think there's any doubt of *that!*"

"And so you really mean it? you really love her, Rupert?" gazing into his face with incredulous surprise.

"Yes! I really mean it. Indirectly the fancy dress ball, and our startling meeting in the Picture Gallery, began it. When I saw the pretty ghost in the library, it was a case of love at first sight!"

"And she knows nothing, of course?" inquired Katie.

"No, nothing! How could she? do I ever get a chance of speaking to her?"

"Oh, Rupert! What will mother say, and Blanche?" exclaimed Katie, looking at him with an expression of the liveliest dismay.

"They can say what they please, as long as Helen says 'yes!'" he rejoined valiantly. "And now mind you keep my secret, little Kitty," rising and holding out his hand. "I know, I have your good wishes, only you are afraid to utter them."

"Yes! you have my very best wishes,—although it is shockingly imprudent. Don't you realize, how the whole county will throw up its hands and shriek?" said Katie, rising to take leave of him.

"That is my own kind little Kitty," he replied, stooping to imprint a brotherly kiss on her cheek. "And now, I really must be off. Good night!"

CHAPTER XIII

SIR RUPERT LYNN was unmistakably in love, and strange to say, for the first time. Although he had passed his twenty-ninth birthday, it seemed incredible that Cupid's torch had not earlier been applied to his slumbering susceptibilities. He had always entertained an ideal of his own; an ideal endowed with beauty, grace and youth, whose realization he had never yet encountered, in spite of his world-wide wanderings; and now at last his divinity had made her appearance, in the unexpected form of his aunt's governess; and notwithstanding her lack of wealth and station, he was as ready to worship her, as if she were some high-born princess! He haunted Thornhurst between eleven and one, and had more than once come across Miss Browne and her companions, and enjoyed a delightful saunter through the lanes, or the grass rides, that intersected a portion of the park. Alas! no sympathetic *tête-à-tête* were these; Katie and Lulu, were always at his side, —in fact Katie made a very strict little chaperon, and ruthlessly curtailed such golden moments. Much as she loved Helen, and well as she wished her,— she felt reluctant to promote her cousin's insanity! These meetings were on the part of Miss Browne entirely accidental. They were short, they were unsatisfactory, still they were better than nothing, as Sir Rupert generally managed to carry away a look, or a blush— on which to subsist for days.

The garden-party at Cardew had been postponed, in

order that Rupert's aunt, on his father's side, might be able to be present, and undertake the part of hostess in her nephew's house. She had promised to come,—to the secret annoyance of Mrs. Despard, who would have enjoyed the rôle, herself; but Sir Rupert had whispered to Katie that his aunt Despard would not be a satisfactory coadjutor; she might not be able to find room for *all* his guests! And about those guests, especially one guest,—there had been many sharp words, and a warm discussion. However, Sir Rupert, nobly supported by Mr. Despard, had carried all before him. He had wrung a reluctant permission from his aunt, and Miss Browne, and the younger Miss Despards, were to be allowed to honour his entertainment.

The party from Thornhurst reached Cardew by four o'clock. The place looked to the best advantage, that lovely August afternoon, with its long deserted terraces and gardens, bright with many brilliant groups, its long closed reception rooms, once more crowded, once more re-echoing with the sounds, of many voices, gay laughter, and music.

Lady Vavasour, Sir Rupert's aunt, stood on the terrace, receiving all arrivals; a stately, upright dame, with clear-cut features, and piercing brown eyes. Those eyes rested for more than a conventional second, upon the fair, slight girl, who was presented to her by her nephew,—with an impressiveness, that was distinctly significant. But no! Rupert could never be such a mad fool, as to lose his head about a lovely face,—and a lovely face it was!

Refreshments were served in the library, the drawing-room was devoted to the dowagers, the hall to dancing, and an elaborate cold dinner, or supper, as it might be called, was laid out, in the grand old dining-room. The long table was covered with family plate, and

priceless china; greenhouse and garden had been ravaged for flowers; scarlet geranium and maidenhair, ornamented the board, in vast, brilliant and feathery masses. Piles of strawberries and peaches in deep dishes, and jugs and bowls of clotted cream, were interspersed among the most dainty, and delicate viands, garnished according to their kind, with miracles in white sugar, or truffles. A private view of this most appetizing sight, had been obtained by Lulu; but Miss Browne had long been revolving among the dancers in the hall. The beautiful governess was quite a noted person, the cynosure of all, and the coveted partner of every male dancer. Several pair of eyes contemplated her as she floated round the room,—with very varied feelings. Mrs. Despard's, need scarcely be described! Mr. Dolly Despard, eye-glass in eye, regarded her with a sense of serene complacency,—and the air of a future proprietor. Somehow Miss Browne looked different to-day! She seemed to have cast off the retiring, almost humble carriage, that distinguished her at Thornhurst, and to have taken her place in society, as the equal of the other guests, not merely in beauty; but in birth! Observe her talking to Sir Roland Fortescue, with as much ease of manner, and as ready with words and smiles, as if she was actually a young woman of acknowledged position, and wealth!

Dancing had brought a colour to her cheeks, a brilliancy to her deep blue eyes; no wonder that people were staring and whispering; no wonder that Sir Rupert found it difficult to play the part of an active, and impartial host. However, he fulfilled his duties to perfection. The dance was going off with verve, and abandon, and thanks to his exertions, promised to be a long remembered success; and yet he had not had one dance with Miss Browne. Their dance,—for she

could only give him one—was to be after supper, and when the band struck up the first strains of "Amoureuse" he was already beside her; and so was Dolly. Dolly, who had eaten, drunken, and in the Biblical term, was filled, clamouring in a thick, hoarse voice, for "just this one waltz;" as if Miss Browne's card had not been crammed, hours ago! Placing her hand on Sir Rupert's arm, she passed away from Dolly, who, looking the very incarnation of champagne, slowly subsided upon a neighbouring sofa, and after a few minutes' aimless nodding, laid his muddled head upon a sympathetic cushion,—and was soon lost in the land of dreams.

Sir Rupert proved an ideal partner, and Helen, although she had only been to half a dozen balls in Melbourne, was naturally a born dancer, had been extremely well taught, and could suit her step to another's, at a moment's notice. The first dance, with the beloved one, is a pleasure to be remembered; and Sir Rupert felt as if he had been suddenly transported into a seventh heaven! But alas! everything must have an end,—no matter how enthralling. The waltz was over, and people began to drift out into the garden, or among the long suite of rooms, that opened on the hall; but Sir Rupert followed neither. Turning to a swing door, and holding it back for his partner, to pass, he said:

"I have something to say to you;—will you come up to the Picture Gallery?" He did not wait for any reply, but immediately proceeded to lead the way. They encountered various couples coming and going on the stairs,—for "to see the pictures," was a favourite bait, by which the flirt of either sex, lured their partner to the delights of a *tête-à-tête*, in that deliciously romantic old gallery!

It was not merely "to see the pictures," that her host was escorting Helen upstairs; there was a resolute expression on his firmly-cut lips, that betokened a mind fixed on something, far beyond the portraits of his ancestors.

"Here is the place where we first met," he said, coming to a halt inside a low doorway, near the well-remembered mullioned window.

"Yes, so it is," assented Helen with surprising composure.

"We were masquerading in the characters of a couple of my ancestors, husband and a wife, were we not? May I look upon it as a good omen?" he asked in a low voice. Helen made no reply, and he proceeded more hurriedly, "I needn't tell you, that I love you, Helen, for you *know* it. I gave this dance entirely to secure a chance of seeing you, and speaking to you alone.—An opportunity I am never likely to have in my aunt's house. Tell me quickly, for the golden moments are flying. Will you be my wife?"

For some seconds there was no reply, Helen kept her eyes fixed upon the floor, whilst the rapid change of colour from crimson to white, betrayed that she had not been indifferent to his avowal!

"Do you know, what you have been saying?" she asked at last, raising her eyes to his, and speaking with surprising self-command, but with lips that trembled. "You have been asking me; your aunt's penniless governess; to be your wife! to take rank with one of these!"—indicating a very forbidding, haughty-looking matron. "You cannot have counted the cost."

"I have fully," he answered with decision; "you, if you will, and no one else, shall be the future Lady Lynn; and if all my ancestors were as lovely, as worthy

as you are,—their husbands must have been happy men!"

"Have you thought of what your aunt,—of what everyone will say?" she asked impressively.

"I do not care two straws for what my aunt may think or say,—and for everyone else, there can be but one opinion, that I'm the luckiest fellow in the county,—that is, if your answer will be 'yes.' Come, Helen," taking both her hands in his, "tell me the truth at once! Do you care for me, or not?" looking down into her face, with his heart in his eyes.

Then as he met hers, that told a tale more convincing than words, he raised her slim little hand, and pressed it to his lips. Dropping her hand, and drawing her towards him, he said, "Then I may consider that you belong to *me*—for the future?"

"Yes!" stammered Helen, holding back, and evading his embrace. "But I have something to say to you first."

"You don't care for any other fellow; you have never been engaged before?"

"Never!" she replied with emphasis.

"Nor I," he answered. "I began to think it was not in me, ever to fall in love; I began to think, that I was outgrowing that danger; I never saw a face that I cared to look at twice; I never heard a voice that made my heart go one beat faster, till I met you here in this very spot! Somehow when I held you a trembling little prisoner in my arms, that moonlight night just six weeks ago, I had a conviction, that I had met my fate! You know I am poor, Helen; I have not much to offer you in the way of money; we shall have to pinch, and screw, for the estate is encumbered, and it will take years to pay off the mortgages,—unless my share in a mine in the Argentine, should turn up

trumps! However, you have never been used to riches, and I am sure, I can make you happy! You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, I do believe you," replied his companion, looking at him with misty eyes.

"And when will you marry me? when am I to take you away from that house of bondage?" he asked eagerly.

"Not before December,—if then."

"December," he echoed, "nonsense! You shall go and stay with my Aunt Vavasour, and we will be married from her house, within the next six weeks. There is no reason for any delay! I shall tell Mrs. Despard this very evening, that she must look out for another white slave; for that you have found a new situation."

"No, no, please do nothing of the kind, Sir Rupert."

"Rupert!" corrected her lover hastily.

"Then, Rupert, our engagement must remain a secret for the present! Do listen to me for an instant," she proceeded in a low, tremulous voice. "I am not what I appear to be,—I am an impostor, a deception,—and a sham!"

"You are not what you seem; do you mean to tell me that you are not Miss Browne,—that you have another name?"

"No! I am Helen Browne, and I do," blushing deeply, "love you; there is no sham about these two facts; otherwise, I am not what I seem! I know I am speaking in riddles, but if I were to tell you a part,—I must tell you *all*. In four months' time you shall know everything; but it is not in my power to enlighten you *now*."

"I don't understand it," he said gravely.

"Then I must try, and explain. In a moment of

sheer folly, half in joke, and half in earnest, I put myself into a false position; little dreaming of the consequences; and I have agreed, thanks to a sort of foolish, stiff-necked pride, to remain in this position,—for a full twelvemonth. By the end of that time, I feel sure, that I will have been sufficiently punished for my folly!"

"May I ask, if there is a man at the bottom of the business?" inquired Sir Rupert, with an element of jealous suspicion in his voice and expression, that showed how easily he would become a prey to the "green-eyed one."

"Yes! there is a man, who is old enough to be my grandfather,—I daresay you will see him at Christmas."

"Will you swear to me, that there is no young fellow in the background,—and that you have never cared for anyone before?"

"No, never! on my word of honour! I know very few young men,—and was never much in gay society."

"What, not in India!" he cried in amazement; "how could you keep out of it there?"

"Oh, we won't talk about India," she returned, colouring brilliantly, "at any rate, not now."

"Then am I to wait on probation four whole months?" said her lover gloomily. "I call it hard lines, awfully hard lines!"

"Your patience shall have its reward,—I can promise you that,—if I can say nothing more——"

"All right, give me a first instalment in the shape of a kiss," he said, stooping towards her.

"You may take one," she returned, in a half whisper, and thus permitted, he pressed his lips to her pretty little curved mouth for the second time in his life. "And you really will trust me, Rupert?" she asked after a moment's silence; "I know I am asking

something enormous,—you know so little about me. I seem to know all about you, and for four long months I am obliged to keep you in the dark."

"I will trust you, my darling, as I would the angels in heaven themselves."

"Then I promise, that I will never abuse the trust you have placed; you shall never regret your confidence and generosity," replied Helen impressively. "You are a foolish fellow!" she added, and a sudden smile lit up her face; "you are not merely going to marry a girl without position and money, but as if that were not bad enough,—you are going to marry a girl with a *secret!*"

"Yes! I am," he answered valiantly.

"And you will always believe me, no matter how appearances may be against me? no matter what you may hear, or even what you may see?"

"I have given you my promise," he answered rather stiffly; "I never break my word."

"Give me a pledge as well," she urged persistently.

"I will give you this; though it is not necessary," removing his signet ring, "and you shall have an engagement ring as well,—I will send for it to-morrow."

"No, no," she replied, tying up his pledge in her little lace pocket handkerchief, "I shall stick to this until December, then you may give me the other ring,—the engagement one."

"What are you talking about?" he said impatiently, "the ring I will give you then,—will be a plain gold one."

"And you will never love me less, than you do now? and never distrust me?" she whispered, as they were leaving the gallery, on the point of returning to commonplace existence.

"Never!" he answered, with emphasis.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE is no occasion to linger over the departure of Sir Rupert's guests, nor to tell how Mrs. Despard, Miss Despard, and Mr. Adolphus Despard, motored home in the cool moonlight; two of the party more than half asleep; one sitting alert and upright, staring out in the bright white night, with wide, unseeing eyes,—and a face expressive of the grimmest resolution.

That same night Mrs. Despard received a visit from her eldest daughter. She was amazed to see her walk into her room, in a flowing dressing-gown, at the unusual hour of one o'clock. Mrs. Despard was tired, it had been a fatiguing day, she was nearly ready for bed, and indisposed for a private conference.

"Mother," said Blanche, sitting down on the end of a sofa, "I have something to tell you,—something you must know before I sleep to-night."

"My darling Blanche," exclaimed her mother excitedly, "you don't mean *to say*, that Rupert has proposed?"

"Yes, but not for *me*," rejoined her daughter, "not for me,—but for Miss Browne!"

"Heavens above!" cried her mother, invoking the ceiling with startling emphasis, "you are out of your senses. Whatever Rupert is; he is no fool! He may amuse himself with her,—but no, he will never marry her."

"You forget that Rupert never amuses himself in the way you mean, mother!" returned her daughter

dryly, " and I suppose I may trust the evidence of my own eyes and ears. I went into the gallery to look for a glove I had dropped, and I saw, and heard, enough ! "

" What did you see ? " demanded her parent.

" I saw him kiss her, I heard him ask her to be his wife. It is needless to remark, that what I tell you is strictly, strictly private. I was going in by the little side door, near the end of the gallery ; they were standing in the window, no one else was there, they did not notice me, their backs were towards me. I held the door just ajar, and heard everything,—I felt it was my *duty* to listen ! "

" He asked her to marry him," said Mrs. Despard in a choked voice, " and she, what did she say ? "

" Need you ask ! Why she jumped at him, of course ! "

" So much for your father's pig-headedness," cried Mrs. Despard, almost in tears. " He would keep this abominable, designing girl, and I always felt that she would work some terrible mischief. Your father is so short-sighted and obstinate, declaring that she was doing wonders with Lulu, and Katie. Pretty wonders ! she has *done* for Rupert ! I heard your father telling twenty people this evening, that Miss Browne was a treasure ; so you see exactly how my hands are tied ! What can I do, or say ? How can I dismiss her ? when everyone hears that she is so clever, so modest, so good-tempered,—*I* am helpless ! "

" I know what you can do, mother," said Blanche. " I think I have an idea, and if we could only get her out of this house, and if we could only open Rupert's eyes,—we would be doing a good deed, would we not ? "

" Certainly, my child," responded her mother.

" Well, for a long time, I have suspected that there

was something suspicious about Miss Browne,—and now I know it."

"You don't mean to say so?" cried her parent.

"I heard her telling Rupert that she could not be openly engaged to him, until December."

"Well, there is some comfort in that!" ejaculated his aunt.

"She said, that she is not what she seems."

"Oh, that I'll be bound, the little hypocritical minx," interrupted Mrs. Despard, with cordial assent.

"She said she was in someone's power, some man, and that she would not be *free*, till he came home. She said 'you are not only marrying a pauper, and a nobody——!'"

"She never uttered a truer word," interrupted Mrs. Despard.

"'—But you are marrying a girl with a secret.'"

"Ah, ha, a secret! Well, she won't keep it long with you on her trail, Blanche," said her mother. "I never knew such a girl as you are, for getting to the bottom of people's affairs! you are quite a detective in petticoats, in your way; it was *you*, who found out all about Miss Clarke, and how she was carrying on with the station master; it was you, who discovered that Miss Morgan drank,—and what all her headaches, and neuralgia, meant!"

"Oh, yes! Mum, I think I can put two and two together as well as most people;"—then breaking into a sudden glow of indignation—"Could you have believed it of Rupert? Of all people, could you have thought, that he would be such an abject fool? And he is fond of her,—really fond of her," she added with an accent of intense bitterness.

"Oh!" snatching up her candle and trailing towards the door, "it is enough to drive one *mad*."

CHAPTER XV

NEEDLESS to state, Sir Rupert made his way over to Thornhurst the morning after the dance, in hopes of seeing his fiancée, and equally needless to state, that thanks to his aunt's precautions, he did not even catch a glimpse of the skirt of her dress. Miss Blanche took a certain amount of spiteful pleasure in preventing any lovers' meetings; she gave her diplomatic mind entirely to the question; and for three whole days, the visitor came to Thornhurst, full of happy expectations, and returned, the prey of bitter disappointment.

But a good time was coming! Helen found it impossible to withhold her news from Katie; she felt that she must open her heart to someone, and she had an instinct, that Katie would be sympathetic; so one night as they were sitting together, working on a splendid altar cloth, for the adornment of the local church, Helen broke the intelligence, after several vain efforts to find an appropriate beginning, by taking off Sir Rupert's pledge, and pushing it towards her companion.

"Do you know this ring, Katie?" she asked, with a warm blush.

"Know it," replied Katie, laying down her needle, and taking it into her hand, "of course I do; it's Rupert's. Did he give it to you?"

"Yes!" replied Helen.

After a long silence Katie said, "Then I suppose you are engaged to him?"

"I am; but, dear Katie, it is a dead secret, not a

soul is to know anything about it but yourself,—and somehow I couldn't help telling you."

"Helen," said Katie, laying her hand on her friend's shoulder, and kissing her tenderly, "when Rupert told me some time ago, that he intended to ask you to be his wife, I must confess I was a little vexed, because you know you have no money,—and oh! he *does* want it so badly for the old place; you can't think how that red-tiled roof sucks up hundreds of pounds, and the drains want doing, they say; and he keeps on all the old people,—when they are past their work, and has to get young hands in to help them. But after all, money isn't everything, money can't buy love, and happiness, and I believe you can give him both. I am delighted to hear, that it is all settled—and you will be my own cousin, then and always."

Little did Katie dream, that Helen was already, "always her own cousin!"

The two girls sat up until late, discussing the all-engrossing topic, Helen listening with greedy ears to her companion's praises of her lover, to the reminiscences and legends of his boyhood, and to the gratifying intelligence, that "no one had ever known him to be in love before."

"He has always been so hard to please, and so *difficile*."

"And at last he has chosen a penniless governess," cried Helen, with a smile; "but, Kitty my dear, I am not altogether what I seem; I have a secret, and when you know it, you will think I am a more suitable match for Rupert,—than I now appear."

"A secret! Does Rupert know?"

"No, I have not told him, and there he shows the most wonderful generosity; he is willing to wait til the end of the year, to know all about me, and my past

I once did an extraordinarily foolish thing. It was not actually wrong, only reckless, and silly. It has had consequences I never dreamt of! It did not bring any harm to anyone; it was a half sort of *joke;* and I am paying the penalty in terrible *earnest!* By the end of the year, I shall be released from my penance,—and you will see me in my true colours!"

"Then you are not what you appear! Are you not Miss Browne?"

"I am, and I am not! but it is a riddle you would never guess, my clever little Katie. Only trust me as you have ever done,—and you will find your trust, will have been well bestowed."

"It must be horrible to have a secret," said Katie; "isn't it always preying on your mind,—and taking away your appetite, and making you lie awake for hours?"

"No, indeed," replied Helen, with a smile, "not when my mind is full of other things. At first, I must confess that it was hateful; but now I've grown quite accustomed to it, like a pig with a ring in his nose! So far it has never done me any harm,—and I don't believe it ever will!"

Katie received all Helen's hopes and fears, and confidences about Rupert, with ready, and appreciative sympathy. Poor Katie! who would never, never, have a lover of her own. She also told her what a good son he had been to his horrid, extravagant, unprincipled, old father,—who, utterly heedless of who was to succeed him, had squandered every halfpenny he could raise on the estate, and how, after years of riotous living, racing, gambling, and all manner of ill-doings, he had come home to die at Cardew, a broken-down, dissipated old wreck. How he had lingered on

for two years, a peevish, irritable invalid, nursed by Mrs. Bunce, waited on by his son,—whom he had compelled to leave the army, and sacrifice his prospects.

Thanks to chance meetings in the park, Helen and Rupert contrived to see one another once or twice,—always in the presence of Katie and Lulu,—but Katie with thoughtful dexterity, manœuvred to leave the lovers to walk behind; luring Lulu to her side, by means best known to herself! So Rupert talked to Helen freely of his past, his present, and of their—happy word—"future." With marvellous delicacy, he never touched upon her former life, nor asked a single question, likely to trench in the most distant manner upon the mystery in which she had wrapped herself. Until she elected to lift the veil, he was content to remain in darkness; his blind trust moved Helen more than words could say. Oh! that it were December, that her uncle had come home, and that she could be herself again,—and tell him all!

One evening there was a grand dinner-party at which Katie, to please her father, had been a most reluctant guest. It was about ten o'clock, when Katie came limping into the schoolroom and stooping over Helen whispered: "Rupert is here, you are to go to him at once; you will find him on the croquet ground; he says he *must* see you."

Wrapping a light scarf over her head, Helen hurried downstairs and fled through an open library window, and down the terraces, like a lapwing. The croquet ground was in a spot, not commanded by the windows of the house. Walking up and down, she found Rupert, smoking a cigarette, which he tossed away the moment he caught sight of her.

"Helen," he began, "I have some news for you, and not very good news, I am afraid."

"And is that the reason you sent for me in such a violent hurry?" she asked, with a smile.

"No, indeed, my dear, but because I am going away to-morrow, all the way to Naples. My uncle, my father's brother, Colonel Lynn, is dangerously ill,—he is old and lonely, and I am his nearest of kin; I cannot leave the poor old fellow to die, all alone in a foreign country. Whenever he is better, or whenever he breathes his last, you may be certain, that I shall return home as fast as steam can take me. Helen, you will miss me,—say you will miss me a little?"

"Miss you! I shall miss you every day, and all day long; for although I so seldom see you,—yet to know that you are so near, is something, and now, you will be miles and miles away."

"But you will write, and I will write," he proceeded cheerfully. "It won't be for long; a month at the most."

"Whatever happens, you will trust me," said Helen with an ill stifled sob. "You will always believe in me,—and be the same to me as you are now?"

"Always! always!" he repeated; "and now I must go; I shall be wanted to make up a four at Bridge; and unfortunately we have to say 'good-bye,' or rather *au revoir!*"

One morning, a few days after Rupert's departure, the schoolroom was visited by Mrs. Despard,—a rather rare occurrence. With more than her usual uprightness of carriage, she came sailing into the schoolroom, whilst Lulu was in all the agonies of writing a French *thème.*

"My visit is to *you*, Miss Browne," she explained. "I had a letter this morning from your friend Mrs. Phillips, from Madras, requesting me to tell her, if you were still under my roof? and enclosing *this!*" handing Helen

a thin note on foreign paper, with the very tips of her fingers. "She says she has written to you over and over again and you have never answered one of her letters. Most extraordinary! It is not, as I can tell her, from lack of *leisure*," concluded Mrs. Despard, with a disagreeable sneer.

Many letters had come from the same destination, and they all lay in Helen's desk, unopened. Why should she read them? she said to herself, they were not intended for her, but for that other Miss Browne, who lay many fathoms deep under the waves of the Mediterranean.

"I presume, you will answer that letter?" continued Mrs. Despard; "at any rate, I have done my part, and I shall take care to let Mrs. Phillips know, that I myself gave it into your own hands! Lulu! how you are stooping; do sit up! You really ought to lie on the floor every day, for a couple of hours, and dear me, what inky fingers, I'm afraid you are hopelessly untidy."

The rustling of Mrs. Despard's departing skirts was hailed with a sigh of relief, by the three girls in the schoolroom; her visits of inspection were fortunately few, but they were uncommonly searching, and invariably unpleasant.

When lessons were over, Helen, after some consideration, reluctantly opened the note which lay intact, beside her. As she slowly perused it her face grew as grey as death; she looked as if suddenly turned to stone. Katie, hardly less white than herself, meanwhile devoured her with her eyes. At last her hands dropped helplessly into her lap, and this apparently moving letter fluttered to the ground. Helen made an effort, a fruitless effort to rise, and in another moment, fell forward senseless on the table.

Perhaps you would like to see the fatal epistle, that had such a stunning effect on Miss Browne? Here it is:

"Cathedral Road,
"Madras.

"MY DEAR RACHEL,

"What has become of you? I have written and written and written, and begin to think you must be *dead*. Seriously, Mrs. Hogan has sent me two terrible letters about you, declaring that she must have money at once,—surely you wouldn't wish your own child to starve, you know you told me that your own little income of fifty pounds a year, was to be put aside solely for him; and you would support yourself as a single woman. Mrs. Hogan informs me she has not heard from you, or had a penny since you left Madras, and the last payment was made more than eight months ago. You know she cannot keep the child for nothing; he is now a boy nearly two years old, she has her own children to consider, and I am always in debt; you know me of old—milliners' bills—chronically broke, and never having a pice, I can call my own! Do post her a good sum, on receipt of this letter, by hook or by crook,—or else, she will send your little fellow to the workhouse. She declares she will,—for he and she and hers, have been wanting the necessaries of life! Her other alternative is, that she will appeal to your husband, and tell him of your and the child's whereabouts; so you see, that there is not a moment to be lost; and surely you would not let your own flesh and blood starve, or go on the parish; even if you have to pawn your clothes, you must send money. Mrs. Hogan is now at 3 Clubs Court, Bermondsey, S.E.

"Your affectionate friend.
"FANNY PHILLIPS."

After all, it was only a momentary giddiness that had seized Helen; almost before Katie was beside her, with salts and toilet vinegar, she had recovered so far as to sit up, push her hair back from her temples in a half dazed sort of way, and, almost superhuman effort—pocket the letter which had given her such a violent shock.

"It was some bad news, something you've just seen in that letter," said Katie, following this action with her all-seeing eyes.

"Yes!" faltered Helen, greedily seizing a glass of water, and drinking it off. "There! I am better now!"

"Has it anything to say to your secret?" inquired Katie timidly; "the secret, you are obliged to keep from Rupert?"

"It has *everything* to say to it," replied Helen with emphasis, "it is a phase of the secret, for which I was entirely unprepared," now standing up and laying her hand on Katie's shoulder. "I cannot tell you what it is—but oh! how I wish I could!"

Seeing her companion's face of grieved, half incredulous amazement, she added, "Never mind, Katie, you shall know all about it some day, and now, if you don't mind, I will go up to my own room for a little."

"Yes, go and lie down, and here," hobbling quickly after her, "take my smelling salts. I wish that horrid letter had been burnt, before it ever reached England!"

"That would have been worse than *all*," replied Helen emphatically,—looking back for an instant, before she closed the door.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Helen reached her own apartment, she seated herself on the first available chair, and endeavoured to collect her senses, and adjust her ideas. So the other Miss Browne was married, and had a child. The wedding ring, was not an empty token ; no wonder, she had evinced such reluctance to assume another character, and to appear in borrowed plumes,—and she, Helen Browne, who had masqueraded in her personality, who was living in her situation, and under her name, was responsible for this dead woman's child ! who by all accounts, was almost starving ! Money must be sent at once, and without the delay of another post ; but where was the money to come from ? Her own fortune was at present a dead letter —the yearly income of fifty pounds belonging to the child's mother was also a dead letter,—for how could she claim it, even if she knew how to set about receiving it ? Here was a dilemma indeed ! From neither of the two characters which she had personated, could she receive one penny ! and yet this poor little waif and stray, was dependent upon her, and must be maintained ! She rose, and opening her dressing-case, took her small, very lean purse, and turning it absolutely inside out, began to reckon up its meagre contents. One pound thirteen and fourpence and two halfpenny stamps represented her worldly all. The cream-coloured costume, she had worn at the dance, although made up by her own clever and tasteful fingers, and its accessories, the hat and gloves,

had made a serious inroad upon her funds; and her next quarter would not be due for another six weeks. How she hated the bare notion of asking for it! and turned over in her mind several schemes for getting a little money,—but each and all on cool reflection, proved impracticable. She could not sell her watch; how, when, or where? she could not borrow from Katie, nor from Rupert,—ten thousand times no!

Alas! there was nothing for it but to face Mrs. Despard, and boldly to make the required demand. Once, having deliberately made up her mind as to the course she was to pursue, she lost no time in unnecessary delay; the longer she waited, the more nervous she would become! it was a very disagreeable, but inevitable task, but the sooner it was over, the better. So she hastily bathed her face, rubbed her cheeks with a hard towel, smoothed her hair, and hurried downstairs, and inquired of one of the footmen—whom she surprised lolling in his master's chair in the writing-room, perusing the *Field*—if she could see Mrs. Despard for a few minutes on business?

"Oh yes, she was to walk in," came the answer from the little blue drawing-room, where she found Blanche buried in a deliciously luxurious *bergère* and a French novel, and Mrs. Despard seated before her writing-table, immersed in the by no means pleasing task of looking over the items of several large,—and in her opinion, monstrous!—milliners' bills. Never of a very urbane and gracious temperament, her present occupation had created a fire of burning indignation in Mrs. Despard's bosom.

"Twenty-five guineas for my opera cloak, Blanche, do you hear! and she said it would be fourteen at the outside. It's iniquitous,—I call it swindling! Sixty guineas for my black lace and silver gown," speaking

in capital letters, and in a tone of absolute horror. "Awful, awful! Just robbery and nothing else."

"Yes, she certainly *is* a wretch," murmured Blanche, without even raising her eyes from her enthralling study.

"A wretch! I should think so! And here is thirty guineas for your last evening frock. Oh, *do* attend, Blanche!" she added irritably. "It is all very well for you to go on reading, and munching chocolate, and taking everything as a matter of course,—but how am I to show Madame Elaine's account to your father; he gave me five hundred pounds two months ago, and said it must last for ages! You can get no more new dresses,—you are shamelessly extravagant!"

"Oh, come, mother, this is a case of the 'pot and kettle,'" rejoined her companion, with easy frankness. "It was only the other day, that you had those new earrings; and you know you have plenty of ways of getting money out of father. Put another hundred pounds on to the housekeeping bills,—stick down an extra fifty for the County bazaar! there's a hundred and fifty at once, and you can easily economize. Why keep that doddering old Jenkins in the garden? He is long past his work, and Katie and Lulu needn't go to the seaside this year. They're never very keen about it; leave them here with their *idol*," she concluded sarcastically.

From the foregoing conversation, it will be readily imagined, that our friend Helen could not prefer her modest request, at a more unpropitious moment.

"An advance of salary, Miss Browne," exclaimed Mrs. Despard in a tone of incredulity. "I regret that it is entirely out of the question,—and utterly foreign to my principles; I never pay for what I have not received."

"But I do want this small sum so very, very, badly,—perhaps for once you would make an exception,—only once," urged Helen with pink-cheeked humility.

"Really! why I'm not surprised, I quite understand your embarrassment, a pressing bill no doubt! Your most foolish and unsuitable style must entail considerable expense; that dress of yours at Cardew was absolutely extravagant. But if your milliner is clamorous, pray don't come to *me*, I absolutely set my face against all kinds of credit, debt, and excess!"

Oh, Mrs. Despard! and what about the little account for seven hundred and forty-three pounds, eleven shillings and ninepence? now lying in your lap, to which is affixed a polite, but firm reminder—that "as the account has now been owing for some time, an early settlement will oblige."

"I assure you, it is not for debt, nor for any personal expense, that I want this small advance," returned Helen.

"Then for what do you require your salary?" inquired Mrs. Despard, with rude curiosity.

"It is not in my power to tell you," replied her governess, looking down in some confusion.

"Then I am sorry to tell you, that it is not in *my* power to grant your request," said Mrs. Despard, with an ironical imitation of Helen's last speech.

"And now!" turning to her writing-table, with a little inclination of her head, "I need not detain you any longer from your duties."

Helen had no choice but to accept her dismissal, and left the room with a heavy heart. What was she to do? was the question she kept asking herself, as she slowly ascended the wide, shallow stairs? Happy thought, as she reached the first landing, her fur coat! Would Miss Despard buy it *now*?

Meanwhile the fair Blanche having placed her novel face downward in her lap, turned to her mother and said, "What *can* she want with the money, Mater? Not for herself! Not to pay a debt; then it is for somebody else,—and for whom? I would give a good deal to know," pinching her chin reflectively.

"I'll tell you what," returned her mother, with a sudden flash of intelligence, "I believe it has something to do with that *letter* that came this morning."

"Why yes! of course, how stupid of me not to have thought of it before! and how sharp of you, mother. Believe me, we shall find that there is some mystery about that girl; some unpleasant mystery. Oh! if I only had the clue in my fingers," drawing in her breath with a short, quick respiration, that augured badly for Miss Browne's chance of escaping detection, or finding mercy at the hands of Miss Blanche Despard.

"And now I must go and get ready to drive over to the Fords'; it's a hideous bore. Don't worry yourself over those bills, mother; if the worst comes to the worst, I shall marry Ashley Ford, whose money is his sole attraction; he certainly has plenty of that,—he is a well-gilded pill!"

"Nonsense, Blanche, the son of that old parvenu; his grandfather was a stonemason,—I never saw such manners. Gervase, our first footman, is a thousand times more of a gentleman." But before her mother had concluded her speech, Blanche had already left the room, and was slowly dawdling up the stairs. As she ascended, she was surprised to see Miss Browne pacing to and fro in the corridor,—evidently lying in wait for someone, and that someone proved to be herself!

"Miss Despard," said Helen, suddenly accosting her, "may I detain you for a moment?"

"Come into my room then, for I am just going out," replied the young woman ungraciously, advancing as she spoke into a large and luxurious apartment.

"She's going to tell me something, I see it in her eyes," she said to herself, as she turned, and faced the governess.

"You once offered to purchase my fur coat," said Helen nervously.

"Yes, I did," returned Miss Blanche, sharply, "and you promptly refused my offer."

"Would you take it now?—the coat I mean—it has been but little worn, and you can have it for half-price, —twenty guineas!"

"Half-price, how am I to know, what you paid for it?" returned Miss Despard.

"My mere word," said Helen, becoming very red, and repressing her indignation with a strong effort, and "I can show you the receipt; I bought the coat at Harvey and Nicholls."

"Ah, well, I should certainly like to see *that*," said Blanche judicially; "it was ridiculously dear, not worth more than thirty at the outside, and you have worn it a good deal. I'll, let me see—I'll give you fifteen pounds for it, when I get my next allowance."

"Fifteen!" echoed Helen, with a face of blank dismay; however, fifteen was better than nothing,—and she *must* have money.

"Very well, I will accept the fifteen pounds, but I shall want it now," said Helen with decision.

"What, to-day, this very day!" exclaimed Miss Despard.

"Yes, if you please," making a desperate struggle to appear collected.

"Oh, well, you *are* a dun! I'll see if Dolly can lend me the money; pounds, not guineas, you know, and

you may as well bring me the coat. I will wear it this afternoon,—as the day is a bit chilly. Pray do not let anyone know that I bought it from you,—as I am not in the habit of wearing secondhand garments, but as you are in such absolute distress for the money——"

"You don't mind doing me the favour of taking my forty-guinea coat for fifteen pounds!" interrupted Helen, her patience giving way at last, and, indeed, considering everything, her self-command had been astonishing.

"Be so good as to send me the money in notes, before post hour," she added with a haughty little bow, then turned away, and left the room.

"Send you the money before post hour!" repeated Blanche to herself, when she had recovered from her amazement at the insolence of the governess; "send you the money *before* post hour, you stuck-up fraud. Yes, that I will, and what is more, I'll find out to whom you are sending it, before I've eaten my dinner."

Twenty minutes later, wrapped in Helen's possession, Miss Despard was rolling down the avenue *en route* to an afternoon Bridge party, and Helen had received two Bank of England notes in an envelope. These she enclosed in a hastily penned letter, dropped into the box in the hall with her own hand,—and then breathed a long sigh of thankful relief.

What would she have thought, had she been in the vestibule three hours later, an invisible spectator of a young woman who stealthily unlocked the receptacle, and sorting its contents with swift, deft fingers, came on her own contribution to the evening post. It was addressed to Mrs. Hogan, Clubs Court, Glass Street, Bermondsey, London, S E.

"Ah!" feeling it between a sensitive thumb and

forefinger, " so the fifteen pounds goes to a Mrs. Hogan, in a low slummy street in London."

Then pencilling the address hastily on a card, she said half aloud, " I shall pay a visit to Mrs. Hogan, and find out what she has to say for herself? Unless I am mistaken, I have got the end of the clue in my hand now ! "

CHAPTER XVII

A DAY or two after this event, Mr., Mrs. and Miss Despard, were announced as being among the recent arrivals at the most fashionable hotel on the Leas in Folkestone. Their departure was a blessed relief to Helen. Although she saw so little of her hostess, and her eldest daughter, nevertheless the air and atmosphere (moral) of the house seemed to be cleared in some indescribable manner. There were no longer storms, thunderclouds, or sharp showers of hail, and Helen felt that she could move about the rooms and the grounds, without feeling a presumptuous interloper, liable to encounter Mrs. Despard's frowns, Dolly's odious civilities, and Blanche's outrageous insolence.

Miss Despard had taken advantage of a day's halt in town, to plead a long owing visit to a schoolfellow. Wearing her plainest clothes, and a thick veil, she took the Tube to the nearest station to Glass Street, having carefully made out her route by map and pencil. Naturally she found herself in a very strange part of the world. After a considerable amount of walking, and encountering unusual odours, and unusual language, she discovered Mrs. Hogan at home ! Her enterprise was successful, and her warmest anti-

cipations, more than handsomely fulfilled. When she arrived back, in Lowndes Square, the amateur detective felt as if she had been taking part in some play, or had had a peep into another and undreamt of, existence! She resolved to keep her adventures entirely to herself, not even taking her mother into her confidence. She was in remarkably high spirits at dinner, that evening, as she realized the fact, that she held a weapon that would inflict on that insolent impostor, Miss Browne, a mortal wound. All she now waited for was Rupert's return from Naples; and it should be his hand, not hers, that should deal the fatal stroke!

Meanwhile Miss Blanche hugged herself over the delicious prospect of her enemy's discomfiture, and thoroughly enjoyed her stay at the seaside. Here, escorted by one of the garrison from Dover or Shorncliffe, she paced the Leas, and listened to the band, played croquet, or tennis,—and motored about the country.

The death of his uncle had released Sir Rupert, and by the middle of September, he was hastening to his native shores, as fast as steam could convey him. Much against his will, he was detained a day in Folkestone, on the pretence of escorting Blanche to London, the following morning; and she viewed his impatience to return to Cardew, with a jealous fury, that was partly corrected and subdued by the thought of the *éclaircissement* that was in store for her infatuated relation! She had hinted to her mother, that a "grand *exposé* of Miss Browne was at hand, and that she was about to open Rupert's eyes," to which her mother, after vainly endeavouring to wrest the secret from her daughter, irritably replied:

"Open his eyes as much as you please, but do what you may,—he will never marry you! I have realized

that, for some time ; my dear, he knows you too well. You have been so much together, that he looks upon you almost as a sister ! "

Mrs. Despard was right, when she declared, that her cousin knew Blanche too well !

" It is quite true," returned her daughter, with a set face, " that he may not marry me ; but he shall never marry Miss Browne ! Never ! "

The next morning eleven o'clock, saw the cousins speeding up to London. They were not alone in the carriage—some friends, to Blanche's unmitigated rage and disgust, had accosted them, and occupied all the vacant seats with many smiles, and expressions of delight,—so there was not the smallest opportunity for the amiable traveller to make a communication, that was figuratively blistering at the tip of her tongue !

When the cousins arrived at Victoria, Blanche, who was a young woman of large resource, said :

" As you cannot catch any train home before three o'clock, you may as well come and lunch with me at my club in Dover Street. Let us go there now ; we have quite a good *chef*, the hall porter will take charge of your luggage, and as you must have a meal somewhere, you may just as well lunch with *me*."

To this invitation, Sir Rupert agreed, although he would have preferred to snatch a meal at his own club, the Naval and Military, and see some of his pals, and hear some of the news. However, he was well inclined to have a little talk with Blanche,—he hoped that he might enlist her good offices for Helen, and make her future position easier !

Blanche was looking remarkably smart, she encountered several lively friends, in the club lounge ; they had a nice little lunch together, and afterwards

repaired to the smoking-room, where they were followed by the page with coffee, and cigarettes.

In a short time they had this smoking-room to themselves,- London in September, is still more or less empty.

As Rupert put down his coffee-cup, Blanche said suddenly, "I'm so glad the place is deserted,—for there is something I want to ask you."

"Ask away," he answered, lighting a cigarette with some deliberation.

"Is it true?" she paused, and then went on—"that you are engaged to our governess, Miss Browne?"

"Perfectly true," he answered, no longer lounging, but sitting erect, and meeting his cousin's eyes with a look that carried conviction to her mind. "But how did you know our little bit of news, Blanche? Did she—did Helen tell you?" he inquired eagerly.

"Oh, no, she hasn't mentioned the fact to anyone, that I am aware of,—I guessed it."

"I hope you admire my taste, and that you and your new cousin will be the best of friends."

"No, on the contrary, I don't admire your taste," said Blanche sharply, "and she will be never a cousin of mine! Listen to me!" arresting Sir Rupert's indignant protest, "Miss Browne will never be your wife!"

"Well, it won't be my fault if she's not," exclaimed her lover.

"Because," said Blanche, slightly raising her voice and laying her hand on his coat sleeve.

"Because what?" he asked impatiently.

"Because she has a husband already!"

For nearly sixty seconds Sir Rupert surveyed his companion with a glance of indignant, but rather amused scrutiny, and then said:

"If I were you, Blanche, I would not let my

animus, carry me *too* far. You have never liked Helen."

"But what, if I can prove my words?" she said, drawing nearer to him.

"Prove what you like, I warn you, that I never believe anything of what I hear, and only half of what I see."

"But I suppose you will admit, that seeing is believing?" she asked in a tone of sharp interrogation.

"*Cela dépend!*" he rejoined with a shrug of his shoulders, and a laugh—the laugh was a mixture of irritation, and contempt.

"Then, what would you say," said Blanche, now stung to intense exasperation, "if I were to inform you,—that Miss Browne is not only a married woman,—but has actually a child, nearly two years old?"

"If you were a man, I would say, that it was a most infernal lie; but as you happen to be a lady, I merely remark, that you are misinformed," he replied, rolling his cigarette slowly between his fingers, in a manner that aggravated Blanche beyond the verge of patience.

"And if you have brought me here merely to repeat improper, and startling fiction,—I can suit myself better at any railway bookstall."

"I brought you here, to do you an act of pure friendship," declared Blanche, now livid with passion, "and you received my intelligence with smiles, and sneers. Go your way; marry this woman, and the consequences be upon your own head; what I have told you is absolute *fact*. I can show you her child, within the next half-hour,—I can show you her own handwriting,—enclosing money for his support!"

"Forged!" declared her companion, quietly.

"Then you believe in her implicitly?" and Blanche's voice was almost a scream.

A bow was her only reply.

"Very well, then, I'll challenge you to come with me and see the proofs yourself? If you refuse, I shall know that you are *afraid* that you may witness what will shake your faith. Now will you come? I *dare* you to come," she added hysterically.

"All right, I answer your challenge! I pick up the glove, and I will accompany you; but just one word," he said, looking at her steadily, with a face that was stern and set, "if I find Miss Browne—as I firmly believe, the innocent victim of your unfounded animosity, I will never speak to you again.—You and I will be strangers, Blanche, as long as ever I live."

"Oh! I agree to your conditions," said Blanche, rising, and looking very white and determined. "I am perfectly prepared to accept all the consequences. Now let us go down, and get a taxi, and drive to Bermondsey. If there are no bad blocks in the traffic you will see Miss Browne's little boy, within the next half-hour!"

CHAPTER XVIII

BLANCHE and her cousin drove away from Dover Street, in solemn and eloquent silence, never exchanging a word, both being in a high state of mental agitation. One, was furious, the other, exultant! Sir Rupert was so startled, and astonished by the recent scene, that his mind was driven out of its usual calm course.

Could this girl, who sat beside him with the white rigid face, have some queer kink in her brain? As far as *he* knew, there was no touch of insanity in the

families of the Despards, or the Beaufort Brownes. He would have given ten pounds at this moment, to be able to soothe his raw-edged sensibilities with a cigarette ; but on the other hand, he would not for a thousand pounds, ask his companion for a favour.

In less than the prescribed time, the cousins found themselves halting in a narrow thoroughfare, to the outspoken amazement, and amusement, of an inquisitive crowd of noisy boys and girls,—who were enjoying a half-holiday from a neighbouring Board School. A taxi-cab, was a novelty in Glass Street, and the like of Blanche's elegant grey tailor-made, and white winged hat, had never been beheld in that locality. Her neat boots with grey spats, provoked many laudatory remarks, and as for the chap with her, he looked " a little bit of all right," not unlike Dandy Jim, the hero of a play that was drawing the community—prices sixpence, to one penny.—Quite a gathering, closed round the couple, as they arrived at Number three. Mrs. Hogan lived upon the second floor, the door stood wide open, and they walked up very dirty stairs to the one-pair front, where they found the object of their visit, Mrs. Hogan with her hands full.

She was in the act of administering to four children,—a belated afternoon meal, the time being three o'clock. These were ravenous-looking shock-headed young people, seated round a plank table, demolishing enormous hunks of bread and dripping, washed down by milk and water,—but a cosy little black teapot on the hob, contained some of the right sort of liquid for Mrs. Hogan's own refreshment.

Mrs. Hogan was a hard featured, weatherbeaten Irishwoman, with an honest face, and a burly figure. Her stiff black hair, was confined in curling-pins, she wore a stained tweed skirt, a dirty blue apron, and a

blouse of the same complexion, fastened where buttons were missing—with murderous-looking brass pins.

Mrs. Hogan appeared to be not a little startled by the arrival of her guests, and paused, milk-jug in mid-air, to ejaculate, "Holy Fathers! what's all this?"

But she was speedily put at her ease by Miss Despard, who calmly assured her, that she had just brought her cousin to see her governess's dear little boy! and to take her the latest news of him,—as he was going down to Thornhurst that evening.

"Lors! you don't say so! times is changed, Miss. Won't you and the gentleman take a sate?" Blanche—reckless of her gown—bravely accepted a chair, but her cousin remained standing.

"Mrs. Bland give me to understand," resumed Mrs. Hogan, speaking with a high Cork brogue, "as how no one was to know a word about Freddy, on account of his Dada, you see; but if this gentleman likes to tell his Mamma, he saw him fine and hearty—well here he is!"—patting a tiny white-haired child, whose head was on a level with the table, his mouth crammed with bread and dripping, and who merely acknowledged the introduction by rolling a pair of large milk-blue eyes, from Blanche to Rupert, and back again.

"This is Freddy, Freddy Bland, he is a little pale and peeky-looking like all Indian children, but bless your heart, he's as tough as leather, and he'd ate the house!"

"You brought him home from India yourself, did you not?" said Blanche, sitting down, and speaking encouragingly.

"Why, yes, Miss, to be sure I did; his mother wanted to get shut of him, fearing the climate. He was a miserable little crowl!"

"Ah! I did not quite hear all about him the other

day,—and it is such an interesting story," said Blanche. "This gentleman is a great friend of Mrs. Bland's"—indicating her cousin, who stood with his back to the door, looking unpleasantly grim.

"Won't the gentleman sit down?" said Mrs. Hogan, hospitably dusting a chair.

No! the gentleman preferred to stand, and the gentleman now went and stood in the window, wearing an expression of countenance impossible to describe. One thing was certain, he did not appear to be in the least anxious to hear Mrs. Hogan's narrative.

"Well, you see, Miss," said the worthy woman, who was garrulously given, and loved the sound of her own voice, "my husband, Dan Hogan, though he was only a Private, was a fine, strong, well-experienced sort of man, and he was made storekeeper up at Bivar, a small hill station in India, terribly out of the way. We and the Commandant and the doctor, and about twenty-five others, would be up there alone, excepting for the blacks,—for as much as six months out of the twelve. Well, Mrs. Bland, a real pretty girl, was the wife of Major Bland, the Commandant, she married him down in the Plains, all in a hurry, after her brother's death, and didn't Major Bland lead her a life and a half! 'Marry in haste and repent at leisure,' there never was a truer word; he had terrible fits of drink, and used to go nearly mad,—many's the time she went in fear of her life;—it was a hell upon earth to her, that place, and she had no friends; no other lady, nothing but the sergeant's wife, and the apothecary's wife,—and *she* was a half-caste, as black as your boot! They did say, as Major Bland was kep' up there, through interest; being a bit out of the way from the authorities, for it was known that he drank; if he was down in a big station, and was seen going about

roaring drunk, he'd be broke, as I needn't tell you,—his friends got him put away, snugly up at this place, until his pension was due,—and he could go home. Sometimes he wouldn't touch a sup of anything but water,—that would be when the draft and the people were up for the hot weather, and then he'd a terrible hold on himself; afterwards he'd break out, like a hundred devils. One day in a fury, he chased Mrs. Bland round about the Bungalow, with a drawn sword in his hand, shouting and yelling like the madman that he was,—so the ayah told me,—and then Mrs. Bland she comes to me, and asks me to take the child home! You see, Dan was time-expired, 'worse luck,' and we were going to England with drafts; and when Major Bland was away in the jungle, we went down the hill, and took Freddy with us. The parting nearly broke his mother's heart, God help her! but she said it was her duty to send him away. She give me three hundred rupees, all she had, but I never got another ha'penny, till about three weeks ago,—as you know, Miss," appealing to Blanche.

Blanche nodded, and glanced at her cousin, who looked as if he had been turned into stone.

"Well, I may tell ye, that when the Major come home, and found the child was gone, he just half-killed his wife; he beat her, he cut her face, and give her a black eye,—she wasn't fit to be seen for weeks,—anyhow her life was terrible, and she made up her mind she would run away too,—and besides she was pining fearful after the child; so she slipped off down to Madras, took another name, got a friend to help her to a place as governess,—and came home last January, in the *Calcutta*,—a woman I know is stewardess,—and she has been with your people ever since."

Here Mrs. Hogan ceased, momentarily breathless.

"What was she like?" demanded Sir Rupert, suddenly.

"When she first come up the hill, she was as good-looking a girl as anyone would wish to lay an eye on—she was tall, and slight, and had lovely hair."

"And has she never been to see the child?"

"Not wance, and that surprises me, it do; but I believe she's keeping dark for fear of the Major; he is in England now, and I believe, searching for her high and low. Dan saw him in the street one day,—Dan has a good job in the gasworks—the Major looked terrible, for all his new clothes; his face so red, and blotchy. He stopped and spoke to Dan, and told Dan he was on the war-path!—all the same he wasn't very steady on his feet! However, Mrs. Bland's pretty safe, where she is from what you say, Miss! never seeing strangers, and going nowhere! Still I think she might have sent me a line in six months, not to speak of some help,—and I'm surprised, she has never made an offer to see little Freddy,—but just sent the money, and the letter."

"Can you show me the letter?" asked Sir Rupert, eagerly.

"And with pleasure," said Mrs. Hogan, rising with alacrity; "it's not every day I get an envelope with fifteen pounds in it. Not but what I'd always keep the child for nothing,—I'm that fond of him, only times is hard, Dan's pension is only a shillin' a day, and although he has a situation, he is not as steady as he might be,—he gets into company, especially on a Saturday night, and only brings me back a few shillin's. Still an all, he never knocks me about,—I'll say that for him!

"Here it is," producing from a battered workbox, a letter, much crumpled, and creased.

Yes! it was in Helen's writing, there could be no doubt of that! Sir Rupert had two in his breast pocket at the moment, in the same familiar hand.

"MRS. HOGAN," it began,

"I enclose fifteen pounds for the support of the child. I hope he is well I am sorry I could not send you this money sooner, but I trust I shall be able to forward another sum, within the next three months.

"Yours faithfully,

"H. BROWNE.

"Thornhurst,

"Wallingford."

"Seeing was believing," with a vengeance! Sir Rupert felt the letters dancing before his eyes, as he perused this fatal little document; even Mrs. Hogan was struck by the ghastly pallor of his countenance, as he handed back the epistle without a word of comment.

"You do look shocking bad, sir," she exclaimed; "sit down, do let me get you a cup of tea,"—her remedy for every ill, that flesh is heir to.

"No, no," he answered impatiently, "I'll just go out into the air, then I'll be all right. Good afternoon, and many thanks," he added with an effort.

"Shure the thanks is all the other way!" whispered Mrs. Hogan, in response to a sovereign, which Blanche pressed into her appreciative palm as she held the door open for her departure.

"Well now, Rupert, I hope you are convinced. Is seeing believing?" she asked, as she overtook him,—striding down the street in a kind of mental daze.

"The idea of his wanting me to keep it dark, and give her another chance!" she remarked to her reflection, with a derisive smile. "She can stay quietly at Thornhurst while we are at the seaside, as she will keep Katie and Lulu quiet, and prevent them from bothering *us*,—but once we return home, *then*——!"

"Then!" was a word of portentous significance, implying whole chapters of disasters, for unconscious Helen Browne.

CHAPTER XIX

SIR RUPERT drove straight to Victoria, and was fortunately in time to catch a train. It was half-past eight o'clock as he was driving up the avenue at Thornhurst, with an expression of stern, unwavering resolution on his countenance. As he travelled down, the only occupant of a first-class carriage, he had ample leisure to coolly review, and weigh the evidence of his senses; and had come to the calm and deliberate conclusion, that Helen Browne was a wily impostor, a marvellously beautiful and accomplished actress,—and that he had been her miserable dupe!

In the meanwhile, Miss Browne was deeply engrossed in a game of cards, with Lulu and Katie, and was losing with her unfailing good humour. The trio were playing "cut-throat" Bridge.

"The rubber!" cried Lulu, laying down her scoring-block. "You have lost five hundred points," looking at Miss Browne, "a penny a hundred."

"Yes! I suppose so," she admitted. "I never hold anything but the rubbish of the pack,—I've almost forgotten the look of an ace,—I have no luck at cards."

"Never mind, Helen!" said Katie, "you are the more likely to have luck at something else!"

Her words had scarcely died away, before one of the footmen entered, and announced, with impressive gravity, "Sir Rupert Lynn in the Blue Drawing-room to see Miss *Browne*."

He added the name in a tone of solemn disapproval, and dignified protest.

"To see *you*!" exclaimed Lulu, and gaping at her governess with open-mouthed amazement. "What on earth for? What can he want at this hour?"

"Never mind, Lulu," said Katie hastily, "probably he brings some message from father. Run along, Helen, and don't keep him waiting. There, you'll do very nicely, your hair's all right."

Helen needed no second bidding, —nor further pressing. With beating heart she sped downstairs, turned the handle of the drawing-room door, and in another second she found herself face to face with Rupert. But the eager greeting died on her lips, and her smile faded, when she encountered his stern demeanour, and frigid bow, —and heard his icy, "How do you do, Miss Browne?"

"What has brought you here so suddenly?" she inquired. "I thought you were to arrive to-morrow; but I am delighted to see you," she added with a blush, "but oh, Rupert, what *is* the matter? You do not seem glad to see me!"

"I am sure you will understand the change in my manner, when I mention, that I saw Freddy to-day."

"Freddy?" she repeated in a tone of bewilderment. "Won't you sit down?" motioning him to a chair; "and who is Freddy?" she asked with a playful smile.

"I *have* heard, that it is a wise infant, that knows its

own father, but I've never yet come across a mother, that didn't recognize her child," he returned impressively.

"What do you mean? you are talking in riddles," said Helen.

"I mean that Freddy is your son, Mrs. Bland," he replied. "But perhaps," he added with scathing irony, "you have never heard the name of Bland before?"

"Never till this instant," declared Helen.

"Nor of Major Bland?" he demanded abruptly.

"Nor of Major Bland," she repeated with slow distinctness.

A pause ensued of at least two minutes, during which the ticking of a little clock was the only audible sound. At last Sir Rupert said with an air of dispassionate conviction, "You have certainly mistaken your vocation,—you would have made your fortune on the stage! You can stand before me, in a strong, and searching light, and repudiate your child, without moving a muscle of your face, Mrs. Bland."

"I am not Mrs. Bland," cried Helen passionately, "I've never heard of the woman; do not call me by her name again!"

"Then, if it is not requiring too much, may I know your real name?" inquired her companion.

"My name is what it has always been, Helen Browne,—but I think you seem to have taken leave of your senses this evening."

"I wish to Heaven I could think so too!" retorted Sir Rupert, "I wish the link of evidence, were not so strong."

"To what does this wonderful evidence point?" inquired Helen, drawing herself up.

"To the fact that you, Mrs. Bland,—yes!" he

repeated in answer to her gesture of indignation—" you, Mrs. Bland, lived unhappily with your husband at a little hill station in India, and in consequence of his outbreaks of violence, you despatched your infant, 'Freddy,' to England, in the charge of Mrs. Hogan, a soldier's wife. Ah!" noting her rising colour, then speaking with cheerful encouragement, " come, your memory is recovering! I was certain, that it could not be possible, to wholly forget the names and existence of husband and child,—in the course of one little year!"

" I repeat that I never heard of *either*, till this moment," replied Helen with wonderful composure, but blazing eyes!

" Did you never know Mrs. Hogan, who lives in Clubs Court, Bermondsey?"

" Oh yes, I've heard of her," she answered.

" And you remitted her money within the last three weeks,—for the support of a child in her charge?"

A low assent was barely audible from Helen's white lips! Surely the waters of destruction, were closing over her; surely her mad escapade had brought inconceivably terrible results.

" You came home in the *Calcutta* as Miss Browne, did you not?" proceeded the inquisitor.

Her bow was the reply; her trembling lips refused their office.

" You came here direct, and took up the post of governess,—which had been procured by the good office of a friend in India; we can trace your movements to the present day, without a missing link."

Unfortunately, it was too true, the weight of circumstantial evidence was overpowering, and indisputably this truth came home to Helen, as she stood before her

judge, with an ashen face, and hands locked together, in a vice-like grip.

"I am sure it is unnecessary to state, that all is at an end between us, Mrs. Bland," continued Sir Rupert, "whatever you may do,—and the laws of our country and morality seem to sit lightly upon you,—I have no desire to connive at Bigamy, or to marry the wife of another man."

Helen endeavoured to speak, but no words would come.

"Who would think to look at you, that you would be capable of such deceit? Such deliberate wickedness, and such studied hypocrisy? Well, you have given me a lesson for life."

"So this is your trust in me?" cried Helen, at last finding her voice. "I asked you to believe in me, and you promised that nothing would change you."

"Under ordinary circumstances nothing would have changed me," returned her companion, his bitterness and pain breaking out,—"but there *is* a limit to one's faith; there is a boundary where belief in the possible, ends; and imbecile incredulity commences. I do not propose to cross that line,—even for you, Mrs. Bland. You will admit, that it is slightly staggering, for a man to discover that the girl he holds but little lower than the angels,—is a wife in hiding, and a mother; and that she, the object of his first and only love, is just a pretty whited sepulchre, full of terrible secrets!"

"Oh," cried Helen, wringing her hands in despair, "what am I to do? how can I clear myself?"

"How indeed?" repeated Sir Rupert ironically.

"Listen to me!" she exclaimed with sudden animation, "I swear to you in the most solemn manner, that I am not what I seem."

"That I can easily believe," he responded.

"I am neither wife nor mother; I never saw either Major Bland—or the boy! Never!"

"And yet you sold your wearing apparel, the very coat off your back, to provide for the boy's support. How is that? Are you prepared to deny that also?" inquired Sir Rupert, with raised brows.

"No, that I admit," replied Helen.

"Well, then, in admitting this, you admit all! It entirely passes the bounds of possibility, that one woman would sell her clothes in order to support the offspring of another person, of whom by her own accounts, she knows nothing,—and has never seen. I remember your beautiful coat quite well,—it must have cost you a pang to part with it. And now I think we understand one another," he concluded, looking round for his hat, and preparing to depart.

"I understand you; but you do not, and will not understand *me*," cried Helen impulsively. "Shall I tell you who I am? will you hear me?" she pleaded with outstretched hand. "I know that appearances are frightfully against me, that everything around seems black –but I had looked to you to stand by me. Shall I tell you, who I am?" she repeated eagerly. "I cannot wait for months,—I must speak *now*."

"No, no, thank you," he returned with a derisive smile, "pray do not tax your powers of invention any further. I must confess, that you look astonishingly young, for the parts you have undertaken—young in years, apparently, and old in deceit. Well, I know you now, Mrs. Bland, and I think there is no more to be said."

"There is a great deal more to be said; but you will not listen. I would have listened to you, in similar circumstances. Your love is worth little, your faith was a fiction; we are not likely ever to meet again, but some

day," speaking with great difficulty, and choking, "I think you will be sorry that you judged so harshly and so hastily of——"

By this time Sir Rupert was leaving the room, and as she hesitated, he added "Mrs. Bland!" And then with a gesture of renunciation, he opened the door, and departed.

CHAPTER XX

KATIE readily gathered from Helen's drawn white face, that something serious had occurred; matters were not going smoothly between her and her cousin; even the careless Lulu inquired if she had a headache? and would she let her off some of her lessons next day?

When this engaging young person had departed to bed, Katie was informed that all was over between Rupert, and Helen. No particulars were supplied, merely the bare plain fact was stated.

"He couldn't trust me, that was the reason," returned Helen, in answer to her friend's queries. "No doubt it is hard to trust,—when appearances are dead against one," she added hopelessly.

"Then Rupert has found out something, you did not want him to discover, *yet*," suggested Katie, with her usual alertness of intellect.

"He has," responded Helen, resting her head on her arms, her arms on the table.

"Something very bad?" asked Katie, in a voice of hushed interrogation.

"Something that *looks* very bad, and I suppose that is all the same," murmured her friend. "Oh, Kitty,

whatever you do, never be led into deception; never attempt to impersonate another character,—even in fun!"

"The last thing that I should think of doing,—or could do," returned poor Katie, with painful thoughts of her own deformity.

"But I'll tell you what I think,—shall I?"

"Yes," said Helen, raising her eyes, heavy with unshed tears, to Katie's dainty profile.

"Whatever mischief or harm has been set going, believe me, that Blanche is at the bottom of it! It seems a shocking thing to say of my own sister,—but that is my firm conviction and belief."

We will not linger over Helen's tears, her agony of regret for her lost dream of happiness. Instead of future golden visions of beatitude, a hideous nightmare seemed to encompass and threaten her; she had a presentiment that something dreadful was about to happen. All she valued most was gone,—now that Rupert despised, and disowned her.—Oh, when would she be free from the shadow of her fatal fellow-passenger? When would security, and her own identity, be restored to her?

A few days after Sir Rupert's visit to Thornhurst, Katie and Lulu announced, that they would drive over to Cardew,—the mere name of which now affected Helen like a brand of hot iron upon her mind.—Not that there was any fear of meeting Cardew's master, he had left home two days after his interview with Helen, and no one had mentioned his whereabouts.

Helen excused herself from joining her pupils, pleaded a racking headache, and declared that she would lie down till tea-time; but instead of lying down, and having carefully locked her door, Helen drew out and opened for the first time, her fellow-passenger's two modest boxes.

The first contained merely linen and underclothing; the other, several familiar dresses, some music, a few articles of Indian jewellery, a well-worn riding-habit, and three volumes of Letts' Diary.

She hastily packed away the contents of both trunks, merely keeping out the album, and the diary. Yes! she was going to read it,—for was it not *her* diary? and must she not be prepared for the consequences of various actions, that no doubt were written down between its leaves. So she bathed her hot forehead with eau-de-Cologne, drew a creaking basket chair close to the window, and opened first, the album.

This contained a large assortment of mediocre-looking people; there were views of bungalows, and tennis groups, and people on horseback and people in carriages. The particular photo of one good-looking young man appeared in various forms. There was also a large photograph of Rachel,—evidently taken before care had set its seal upon her countenance,—and what a pretty, bright girl she looked! Further on, there was a photograph representing the wreck of her charms; a ghastly, hollow-cheeked young woman, with frightened eyes; bearing in her arms, a puny, bald little creature, in long clothes, "Freddy," of course! Opposite to this picture, was one of an officer in undress uniform, a man with a heavy black moustache, and an expression of fiery defiance, not by any means a plain man,—but not by any means a pleasant personality.

"Major Bland!" exclaimed Helen, "or I'm greatly mistaken. So this is the individual that Rupert believes to be my husband! Heaven forbid!" she murmured as she closed the book, and restored it to its place. "And now for the Diary!" Apparently the Diary had only been kept by fits and starts; sometimes there was a lapse of weeks and months without a single

entry. It seemed to extend over a period of about four years—

"Nagapett,
"February 3rd.

"Oh, my dear Diary! I have not written one word in you yet, this year; what a shame! I have been enjoying myself so much, that I've not had a moment to spare, even for *you*. I fancy that very happy people never keep Diaries,—but they ought to, so as to look back on all their good and pleasant days, and to spend them over and over, and over, again. Well, but I am writing rubbish! Let me see. The gunners' ball was on the first of January, I danced nearly all night with Freddy, yes! in spite of my chaperon's angry scowls. On the 4th, we had that long ride, dinner, and a moonlight dance in the old palace; Freddy again! On the 10th, Freddy dined here, on the 12th Freddy had tea here, on the 15th, oh, what a *white* day! Freddy asked me to be his wife! Yes, I've been engaged to Freddy for more than a fortnight, and I'm so happy that I can scarcely sleep,—sometimes it seems to be all a dream! Brother Bill likes Freddy, and thinks he is a real good sort; he laughs and chaffs me, and says, 'he is getting me off his hands at last!' Poor Billy, I'm afraid he will be dreadfully lonely at first,—but I shall still be in the station, and he will dine with us every night.

"April 5th. Oh, April the 5th, I shall always *hate* you! Freddy has just told me, that he has been ordered to take a draft of men to Aden,—he will only be away three weeks at most, and will be back here for my birthday, the 8th of May; but I don't intend to marry him till June. No! no whatever he says. May is an unlucky month for weddings.

"April 27th. A wire has been posted in the club,

to say that there is cholera at Aden. How am I to live through this awful anxiety? eleven more long endless days,—how am I to live through them?

"May 8th. My birthday! A telegram has just come,—but I don't believe it, nor ever shall. I can write down its news here quite calmly,—because it is not *true*. It says, that *Freddy is dead!*

"March 11th. Nearly a year has passed, and I have got over my great sorrow, I am alive and well,—I did not go mad. I laugh and talk, and eat, and drink, and dance, just as I did when Freddy was alive—and yet I know, that I shall never be the *same*. I see the reflection of my faded looks in people's faces, surprise, pity, or indifference—I was very pretty once,—but the best part of me,—my heart,—is buried in the corner of that remote sandy cemetery, and in Freddy's sun-scorched grave. Ah! what do my looks matter? Who cares about them *now?*

"December 18th. Major Bland, who has come down from the hills to our little race meeting, wants to marry me. Why? I'm sure I have no wish to marry him! He is well off, they say; not bad looking, in a certain style, but there is a wild expression in his eyes sometimes, that puzzles me; then how restless he is, never able to keep still, and at the Race Ball, how odd he looked! Was it, as he said, 'the sun'? was it, as people said, 'the champagne'? I am much too hard to please, Bill declares. Dear old Bill, I never intend to leave him; after all there are only the two of us. Perhaps some day, he may find a nice girl to marry, and I shall turn into the old maiden aunt.

No date. "I have not opened this since last September, not since Bill had a fall from his horse, and was killed on the spot, and I was left alone, and almost penniless,—that is to say, I have fifty pounds a year. Thanks to

Laura Phillips, I am no longer alone; also thanks to Laura, I am *married*. I am no longer Rachel Fraser, but Rachel Bland. We have spent our honeymoon in Agra, and we start for our new home to-morrow. Have I been wise? Time will show!

"July 4th. How lonely it is up here, they have all gone away, gone down to the plains, now that the weather is cooler, and James, the doctor and the barrack sergeant, and a handful of soldiers, are all that are left on this desolate hill station. How one misses the merry voices of one's kind! the tennis parties, the little daily gossips,—even the small and feeble jokes. How shall I drag on till next February, when they all come back? How hateful it is sitting alone in this long bare verandah, seeing the mists rise in among the hills, watching the far away happy plains, growing dim in the twilight, and listening to the jackals, scouring round the Nullahs, and the hyenas' hideous howl;—listening too for *his* footstep—as he comes in from a long day's shooting. I must tell somebody, or I shall *die!* Yes, I shall write it down in this Diary,—as there is no one to hear me. Far, far, beyond loneliness, nightfall, and hyenas, yes, and even snakes,—do I dread and fear *him*. There, Diary! you know my secret now!

"November 1st. The baby has been named Freddy. I carried my point there, indeed he said it was such an ugly little devil, that he would not allow it to be called after him. Oh, baby, if I could love you better than I do, I would because of the name you bear! Some day I may call 'Freddy, Freddy, Freddy,' and some day someone will answer,—and break the terrible silence of the last three years.

"December 20th. I shall certainly go mad! I cannot endure this horrible uncertainty! the sensation of lying

down at night, and never knowing if I shall see another sun? Once I opened my eyes, his breath was on my cheek, hot and hurried like the panting of some wild animal; he was glaring into my face with eyes like flame, a long knife in his hand. Resolutely I gave him back stare for stare; a gaze of unfaltering steadfastness, I believe, saved my life; for with a snarl of disappointment, he buried the knife, not in me,—but in the bedclothes!

* * * * * *

"How he drinks! A whole bottle of brandy a day, always,—and yet he is never actually intoxicated; how his hand trembles, and how wild he looks at times. Without doubt, he is now and then actually insane. He sees things too; is not this what is called 'delirium tremens'? Sometimes, he declares the dining-room is full of sheep, and once he screamed out that he saw a large red devil standing in the doorway! No one can interfere with him, he is his own commanding officer, and no one can save *me*. If in one of his fits of madness he murders me, and cuts my throat from ear to ear,—as he has so often threatened,—I may call and shriek in vain. Ours is a lonely bungalow, our servants sleep in distant quarters; there is not a soul near the house but the old Chokedar, and he takes 'ganga.'

"James and the doctor have quarrelled, I may not even speak to him now. In spite of all that I have written, I must confess that James has some good days. He reads, he has taught me piquet, and *écarté*, and I believe, that strange to say, in spite of his awful failing, the little work he has to do here,—is done well,—but then he has a good understudy. One thing is certain,

he's extremely sorry that he has married *me*. He has told me, that I look like someone who has been buried, and dug up again,—I am so dead and alive, and he declares, that though he has been twenty years in India, he has never seen anyone 'go to pieces' as quickly, as I have done!

* * * * * *

"With a drawn sword last night he chased me from room to room; he imagined that I was a leopard! I fled with baby like a mad thing from the dining-room to the verandah, the verandah into the bedroom,—the bedroom to the dining-room, and so round and round, he pursuing us with his head held low, his eyes glaring, uttering the most awful curses, and threats enough to turn one's blood to ice. Thanks to Heaven's mercy, he tripped in the matting, and fell,—and I had time to fly into my dressing-room, bolt the door, and barricade it with the furniture, and there baby and I lay on the floor for ages, listening to his oaths and imprecations, and violent assaults on the creaking, shivering partition. In the morning he appeared much as usual; the attack had passed off, and he made some sort of muttered apology, for *keeping me awake*. My mind is thoroughly made up; I shall send Freddy home with Mrs. Hogan, a very decent, honest woman. Her husband is a private,—and what is called 'an old soldier,' but he is not a bad sort in his way,—though I am afraid he is rather fond of arrack. I suppose it is my duty to remain here as long as my reason holds out,—and moreover I have no money,—nothing but Aunt Fannie's little legacy of fifty pounds a year. Only for little Freddy, how *thankful* I would be to lie down and die!—but to die quietly, and peacefully; to pass away in my sleep;

not to be murdered, not to be hacked to pieces, after a long and frantic resistance.

No date. "Freddy went down to the Ghât to-day with Mrs. Hogan. Thank Heaven for all its mercies.

"I cannot endure this life any longer,—I am going down to Madras to my old friend, Laura Phillips; her husband has got a fine appointment down there, in the Revenue; *he* will never dream of looking for me in another Presidency. The Apothecary's half-caste wife has sold some jewellery for me. *He* is going out to-morrow to shoot chikor, when he returns, I shall be absent."

* * * * * *

This was the last entry in the Diary.

Helen replaced the book, turned the key in the box, and sat down once more in the window, with her hands clasped in her lap, and abandoned herself to some moments of serious meditation; she found herself responsible for the maintenance of a child she had never seen, and yet in spite of the terrible trouble that he had unconsciously caused her, Freddy should never want a friend. She would do all in her power to hide him, and keep him out of the clutches of his fiendish father,—his fiendish father, who by all accounts, was actively engaged in searching for *her*,—she could not refrain from a shudder, at the mere thought.

In taking Rachel Brown's identity upon her, even in a temporary form, she had exposed herself to the hideous possibility of being captured, denounced, or possibly murdered, by a dangerous homicidal lunatic!

It was not only that all her delightful visions of happiness had been shattered, and that she now

appeared to her lover in the blackest of hues, but that she absolutely went in daily peril, not merely of being accused as an impostor, but in peril of her life. Now she could never rid herself of uneasy suspicions, and convictions that she was being watched, and followed?

These were not exhilarating reflections, for a girl who but for her own impulsive folly, would have been enjoying the society of numerous friends, living in what is known as "the lap of luxury," and finding her path through life, both smooth, and thornless.

CHAPTER XXI

TOWARDS the end of September, Mrs. Despard and her family returned home, and whatever spell absence had worked in her, and her eldest daughter with regard to their *bête noire;* there could be no possible doubt, but that so far as Adolphus was concerned, he nobly embodied the good old motto, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Whether it was that Helen's pale cheeks, and increased slenderness of figure made a more direct appeal to his taste, than faint flush roses, and a gracious presence is not certain; but he himself was inclined to be rubicund of visage, and of roundabout girth, and people generally admire their opposites. He now proceeded to lay siege to his victim in an alarming and determined manner, persecuted her with bouquets, books, and worse still, notes,—waylaid her on every possible occasion,—and was resolutely stone deaf to every snub.

His admiration and his attentions, were obvious to all; even to his mother and Blanche, who lived so much aloof from the schoolroom! The poor schoolroom

governess was nearly driven to the verge of desperation; she rarely opened a book, or took up her work, or moved an ornament, without having reasonable grounds to discover, some hateful lurking note!

"I cannot stand this," she exclaimed one day, tearing a little missive into twenty pieces, "it amounts to downright persecution. Only for circumstances over which I have no control, Katie, I really would go."

In spite of circumstances, she *was* going; going a good deal sooner than she anticipated, and alas! making a most humiliating exit.

As already mentioned, Dolly's infatuation had not been lost on his mother, and she was no stranger to his "ridiculous love making," as she termed it. She had known this phase before, and provided that he was merely amusing himself, she was perfectly indifferent to the matter. However, one day she received a rude awakening. It was her habit to pay occasional visits of secret inspection to Katie's room and the schoolroom, when the young people were out, and one fine sunny afternoon, as she was making her rounds, it suddenly occurred to her to open Miss Browne's work basket? and there, lying on the top of all her embroidery silks,—like a little viper in the grass,—was a little note, addressed to the governess in Dolly's well-known erratic writing, and was yet unopened! Without a moment's hesitation, or the smallest scruple, his anxious mother transferred the *billet-doux* to her own pocket, and hurrying from the apartment to the privacy of her own room, with hasty, nervous fingers, tore open the envelope. It is unnecessary to transcribe the epistle in full, but after two lines of endearing epithets, it broke into a plain and ardently worded offer of marriage. "Yes! an offer of marriage," Mrs. Despard whispered

to herself in an awed undertone; and she dropped the paper as if it had scorched her fingers.

"The old birds would be soon brought round," declared the enraptured lover. "Would they?" repeated one of them, with a stiffening of her person, which boded ill for the fulfilment of his happy prophecy! "This is going really too far, I must speak to Blanche," thought Mrs. Despard, and she left the room in search of her Prime Minister,- that is to say, her eldest daughter. As soon as she had found her, she began abruptly:

"It appears, that it is not enough that Miss Browne has bamboozled your father, and entangled Rupert, but she must have Dolly in her net, into the bargain," cried Mrs. Despard, and she thrust her son's incriminating note, into her daughter's hand.

"I should like to know what you think of that, Blanche?" she inquired, after a somewhat long silence.

"I think that Dolly is a stupid little fool!" responded Miss Despard with energy; then making up her mind with sudden resolution, she added, "but you need not be in the least nervous, mother; she cannot marry Dolly, nor Rupert either."

"But why not, what is there to prevent her?" demanded Mrs. Despard forcibly.

"Just a trifling obstacle," replied Blanche, "her husband!"

"What!" almost screamed her mother.

"Yes; for some time, I have known that she is a married woman," returned Blanche, with an air of modest pride in her own discovery; "she is no more a Miss Browne than I am; she is a Mrs. Bland, the wife of a drunken Indian Major, separated from him, and has a child in London in the care of a soldier's wife; *that* was why she wanted an advance of salary, to remit money for

his keep. She sold me her fur coat, she was so terribly hard up."

"A married woman with a child! Why, she doesn't look more than one and twenty!" gasped Mrs. Despard. "Well, you are a clever girl, Blanche," gazing at her offspring with unqualified admiration. "I always felt that there was a screw loose; she did not give *me* the idea of having spent five years in India, though, of course, she must have done so; but I always understood that India aged people; and what an unscrupulous impostor, just an adventuress! What can Laura Phillips have been thinking of, to recommend her! I suppose she hoodwinked her too? Well!" throwing up her head, "your father won't be able to say anything *now*; and go, she shall, to-morrow at the latest! it is my duty to everyone to dismiss her at once."

And this was a duty from which Mrs. Despard never shrank,—that of getting rid of an obnoxious inmate! Smoothing her hair, and pulling down her long lace sleeves, she sailed out of the room, and made her way to her husband's study, where she laid the matter before him, with considerable vigour of speech and gesture. Presently Blanche was summoned as a witness, and without any reserve or hesitation, gave her parents a full description of her visits to Mrs. Hogan. Mr. Despard, when the recital was concluded, sat back in his arm-chair, looking absolutely stupefied. His wife's air was calmly triumphant, and it may be here recorded, that she didn't fail to seize this golden opportunity to read her husband a sharp lecture on the folly of elderly men, who allowed their reason and ideas of right and wrong, to be perverted by the charms of a mischievous adventuress, with plausible manners, and a passable face!

Misfortunes, as we all know, rarely come alone,

they are fond of company. Only that very morning Helen received a letter from Wurra Burra, telling her that her uncle had had a bad fall from his horse, had broken his leg in two places, and injured his back, and that his recovery was likely to be tedious, and "that they were not likely to be able to arrive in England before January, if then? But," added her aunt cheerfully, "as you are so comfortably placed with your own family, and so fond of your cousins, I feel sure, that you will not be so greatly disappointed after all! Of course it is tiresome, having to play the part of governess, but you were always rather a success in that line; Jean and Annie were all the better for your lessons in singing and dancing. It is awkward too, about your money, which cannot be touched either here, or in London, until one of us goes to England, and proves your identity. However, time will not be long running round, and as you have said yourself, you are well content where you are."

Well contented where she was! What irony, in the expression! This was a cruel blow; she had expected her uncle and aunt to be in London in November, and she had believed that her own pride and self-will, obstinacy, or whatever they pleased to call it, would hold out till then. It was too hard, after all her anxious anticipations, and her counting of the very days to their arrival, that her purgatory was to continue!

Helen laid her head down on her arms, and wept with heart-broken bitterness. How was she to endure her present life for four months longer? how was she to bear with Mrs. Despard, to tolerate Dolly? and to stifle the aching pain that was ever and always at her heart? The remembrance of Rupert, and the agony of wounded pride, and blighted hopes.

That same evening, after tea, she was sent for to the

drawing-room,—she alone! "No! not the young ladies too!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Despard wished to see her," said Robin Redbreast. There was something ominous in the solemn manner in which the message was delivered, and Helen's heart beat with a vague feeling of alarm, as she obeyed the summons, and almost mechanically, followed the footman downstairs.

"Miss Browne, ma'am," said the Redbreast, abruptly announcing her, and thus launching the miserable victim into the lions' den.

She found the family, its grown-up members assembled in full conclave, evidently prepared to deliver judgment or rebuke, upon some weighty question. Mr. Despard was standing on the rug, with his thumbs in the arms of his waistcoat, gloomily surveying the carpet, Dolly was sitting astride a chair, with a red and solemn countenance, Mrs. Despard and her daughter occupied the sofa,—their countenances were grave, magisterial, and severe.

CHAPTER XXII

"WE have sent for you, Mrs. Bland"—Helen started visibly—"we have sent for you," repeated Mrs. Despard, in a high acrid voice, "to inform you that we know all about you, as to who you really are, and how shamefully you have deceived us, and I beg to state that both Mr. Despard and myself"—waving one hand towards her better half—"are shocked at the imposition you have dared to practise upon us, and have no further occasion for your services!"

Helen remained speechless, standing half-way between the sofa and the fireplace.

"To think," continued Mrs. Despard, invoking the ceiling with the deepest solemnity, "that my own cousin, Laura Phillips, would have assisted you to this situation. A woman separated from her husband! with a child in the slums of London, a woman with a false name, and probably," now regarding Helen with a knife-edged look from her narrow slits of eyes, "a woman of little or no character; but Laura and I have not met for years," turning to her husband with an explanatory gesture; "Laura was always an oddity, and more or less a fool about money, and other things, and no doubt she has got into slack Indian ways. Have you anything to say for yourself, Mrs. Bland?" she added after a pause.

"I have to say that I am not Mrs. Bland," returned Helen, speaking with an effort. All this time she was standing alone in the middle of the room, as befitted a convicted criminal, upon whom judgment was about to be delivered.

"Not Mrs. Bland?" echoed Blanche, with a disagreeable laugh. "I suppose the next thing we shall hear is that the child with Mrs. Hogan, is not yours?"

"You are right,—it is no more mine than your own," replied Helen.

"No! of course not, and you never sold your fur coat, to pay for its keep? And you never wrote to Mrs. Hogan, to ask how he was getting on and promising more money? It's all our imagination," said Blanche with withering sarcasm.

"Did you even come home in the *Calcutta?*" inquired Mrs. Despard, following up her daughter's lead.

"Yes! I came home in the *Calcutta,*" assented Helen in a choked voice.

"And you've been figuring here ever since as an unmarried girl," broke in Dolly wrathfully. "By Jove, it beats everything; just the limit, and no mistake! Fancy taking *me* in, not to speak of Rupert, and our both being dead nuts on a married woman."

"Be silent, Dolly!" said his mother imperiously; "and console yourself with the fact, that you are not the only person that Mrs. Bland has deceived! You would make an admirable actress, madam! I should really recommend you to try the stage! And I need scarcely remark, that you need not refer to me,—with regard to another situation!"

"Then what am I to do?" asked Helen boldly. "No one will take me without a reference."

"I should think your wits would easily provide you with one; you must tax them to-morrow morning," was Mrs. Despard's calm reply.

"Am I to understand, that I am to go to-morrow, and without a character?"

"Without a character,—certainly," responded Mrs. Despard, "and, indeed, only for my husband's kindness, you would have gone to-night!"

"But what in Heaven's name am I to do? without a home, without friends, surely you will not be so cruel? allow me to remain under your roof just a little longer,—till I can hear from friends."

"Certainly not," replied her hostess in a frosty tone, "and it is useless to clamour like this."

"You have plenty of resources, Mrs. Bland," said Blanche, "so many characters at command; if you have not been so successful in this one,—why not assume another?"

Driven to bay, Helen replied impetuously, "Very well, I will try as you kindly advise,—another personation."

Yes! making up her mind with lightning rapidity, she would declare herself at last; in such desperate straits, there was no alternative; to be turned adrift in the world, minus money, friends, or reference, would simply mean, *starvation!*

"Shall I tell you who I really am?" she asked, looking eagerly from one to another with crimson cheeks, and speaking with impressive utterance.

A simultaneous laugh from Blanche and Dolly was for some minutes her sole reply. Presently Mrs. Despard remarked—with majestic deliberation:

"Thank you! No, I do not think that our credulity would stand a further strain."

"Aunt Isabella," turning upon her sharply, "I am your niece, Helen Browne, from Australia!"

"Aunt Isabella!" echoed Mrs. Despard, half rising from the sofa, and then collapsing again. "How dare you, madam, how dare you call me *aunt?* you are no more my niece than, than," looking round for a simile, —"that coal scuttle. My niece is dead. A bold stroke, indeed, to pretend that you can attach yourself to me, Mrs. Bland."

"I solemnly declare that every word I have said is the truth, it is indeed," replied Helen, with quivering lips. "At least let me speak! Give me a hearing," she urged, turning with an imploring hand, to where her uncle, who had observed with strict neutrality and solemn silence, stood leaning against the chimney-piece.

"At any rate let her speak, Isabella, she has a right to be heard. What is your story, Miss—I mean, Mrs. Bland," he asked with assumed severity.

"Story indeed," sneered Blanche, quite audibly.

"But I am not Mrs. Bland,—I never even heard of the name till the other day——"

Here she was interrupted by a boisterous "Haw! Haw!" from Dolly.

"My name is really Helen Browne, my father Algernon Beaufort Browne was Mrs. Despard's brother."

"That is a falsehood," interposed her aunt sharply, "an impudent, audacious falsehood."

"And he died at our house at Toorak, in Melbourne, as you know, nearly two years ago. My uncle, Mr. Angus MacGregor, is my guardian. I lived with him, and his family on a sheep run, until last January. I was tired of the station life, and I wanted to come to England—in response to your repeated invitation."

Here Mrs. Despard gave a loud and unladylike snort!

"As I was not of age, my aunt and uncle were greatly averse to my coming to England alone,—but at last I carried my point. My uncle paid my passage with great reluctance, and gave me a hundred pounds and took me down to Melbourne, and put me in charge of a lady who was going as far as Colombo. He told me, he was not at all pleased with me,—as he belongs to an old-fashioned school, and he said that if I got into any trouble within the time, before I came of age, he would not come to my assistance, and that I must take all responsibility upon *myself*. My chaperon and I, parted at Colombo, and for the rest of the journey, I felt for the first time in my life free, and independent. When I continued my voyage and came on in the *Calcutta*, I made the acquaintance of another Miss Browne, —some years older than myself; we shared the same cabin, and became great friends, and I discovered to my astonishment, that we were actually bound for the same home——" Here Helen paused.

She had been speaking with an immense effort, her heart was palpitating foolishly, and her lips were

trembling, so that she could scarcely articulate; but after a moment or two she recovered her self-command, and continued in a calm even voice:

"I was always inclined to be reckless and impulsive, and it suddenly struck me that it would be a splendid plan for the two Miss Brownes to change places for the time; I, to personate the poor governess, and she to take the part of the wealthy Australian. I have always had a horrid fear of being liked for my money, and I thought I would try and see if my relations could love me for myself alone, and then when I had secured their affection, I intended to reveal my little fraud."

"As you are doing now," put in Blanche ruthlessly.

"For some time," continued Helen, "Miss Browne would not listen to me, but at last I over-persuaded her, and she entered into the plot, but only for board ship. I have now too good cause to know, her urgent reason for declining my foolish, my imbecile project. The passengers and Captain had never seen much difference between us, and readily accepted Rachel as the heiress, but in a fearful storm one night, she died of disease of the heart, and when I recovered from the shock, I found that all my belongings, papers, and money, had been sealed up and put away as her property, that my aunt, had been written to and acquainted with my death, and that I was now in real earnest, the 'Poor Miss Browne.'"

"Poor Miss Browne!" echoed Dolly ironically.

Helen took no notice of this cruel interruption, but continued her tale, now addressing herself exclusively to her uncle.

"I had not the moral courage to inform the other passengers that it had been partly a joke,—and was now a miserable mistake, so I waited till I arrived in

London, where I saw my father's solicitors, Sharp and Short."

"Ah!" interposed Mr. Despard significantly, "I know the firm!"

"They—or rather Mr. Sharp, refused to believe my tale,—he wouldn't listen to me!"

"Wise man," interpolated Blanche.

"You see, I had no proofs of my identity; for I had no luggage, except the other Miss Browne's, which of course did not belong to me. I had but little money, no acquaintances, so my only resource was to come and take the situation here in *earnest*. I wrote out to my uncle, and told him of my dilemma, and he was very much vexed, but said that it was a punishment, and a good lesson to me for my headstrong behaviour and crazy folly, and he added, that as he believed I was happily and comfortably situated among my own relations, and under my aunt's roof, he would not help me, nor come to my assistance, till December, when I shall be of age,—and he and my aunt and cousins are all returning from Australia!"

"And the *child?*" inquired Mrs. Despard pointedly.

"I never knew, that the other Miss Browne was travelling under an assumed name, that she was really a Mrs. Bland, and had a child in London, until the other day, when I received that enclosed note from Mrs. Phillips, a stranger! As I have taken the place in a certain way, of the child's mother, of course I am bound to provide for him, at least for the present, to the utmost of my power. I do acknowledge that responsibility. I gather that Mrs. Bland was very anxious to keep the little boy out of the clutches of his father, but Major Bland, I have never seen,—and that the child is mine, and that I have even seen it, I most positively deny. I have been to a certain extent,

a most unwilling impostor; I acknowledge, that I have acted with extraordinary folly; a folly for which I have been bitterly punished, and I am your niece, Aunt Isabella," turning to contront a stony-faced figure on the sofa. "Won't you believe me? My father always said, that I was like his family!"

Mrs. Despard glared at her niece in rigid silence. No! she would never acknowledge this fair-haired romancer as kith and kin; she was an actress to the manner born. Glancing at her husband and son, she recognized, the effect of this young woman's eloquence.

Supposing for one second, that what she had been telling them was true? The mere idea made Mrs. Despard's veins run ice.

"Very nicely told indeed; you have the most wonderful imagination, and nerve, but you are not my niece all the same," she remarked, with terrible emphasis.

"It reminded me of the Sultana Sheherazad in the 'Arabian Nights,'" remarked Blanche, "but I really think that to try to assume the character of our rich Australian cousin who is dead, is a little beyond your powers. Do think of somebody else, Mrs. Bland!"

"Blanche!" exclaimed Helen sharply, "some day you will be sorry you've been so hard on me. You believe me, don't you, Mr. Despard?" she urged, turning to him with anxious eyes; "you've always been my kind friend!"

Poor Mr. Despard, with his wife's eyes transfixing him like two steel poignards, how dared he say, "Yes"?

"No, no, my dear young lady, I cannot admit that I am convinced. I'm afraid you are labouring under some strange hallucination with regard to your own identity,—you must not ask me to believe, that any girl who is not practically an *idiot*, would have done what you profess to have done, would give up her

comfortable income, her happy future, and change place, of her own free will, with a complete stranger, the acquaintance of a few days, and accept the rôle, of a poor friendless governess. No, no, it is *too* much," putting up both his hands with a gesture of deprecation. "Why did you not make your story known to the Captain? *Why* did you not discover yourself to us months ago?"

"Ah! why indeed," echoed Helen with tears in her eyes. "Then you do not believe me?" she added looking sorrowfully round. "Oh! won't you?" she added, with a sob wrung from the depths of her misery.

"No, Mrs. Bland," said her hostess, rising, "we do not believe you; you are remarkably clever, but you are not my niece! You know as well as I do, that the poor girl was buried at sea, and I daresay you attended her funeral! And now since I have said my say, and you have said yours,—we need no longer detain you! The station cab will take you to the station to-morrow, the eleven twenty-five from Wilmington, and I do not think it will be necessary for us to meet again."

"And I, your brother's child, as I most solemnly swear to you!——"

"Go!" cried Mrs. Despard, seizing her rudely by the arm, and leading her towards the door. "Do not go over all that nonsense again.—Go! you audacious impostor!"

And in another moment Helen found herself thrust out into the hall, and the drawing-room door slammed behind her!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE next morning Helen, having collected and packed her small belongings, bade a sorrowful adieu to her two friends, Lulu and Katie. Sitting on the side of her bed, with Katie's hand in hers, and Lulu's arm encircling her neck (Lulu in floods of unbecoming tears), she repeated her story of the previous evening; on this occasion, to warmly interested, and believing ears.

"I'm not surprised, no, not one bit!" declared Katie. "Now I know why it was, that I took to you from the first; you are my own cousin,—next thing to a sister, and there was always some secret sympathy between us, that I felt, but did not understand;—our tastes and our dispositions are not unnaturally similar, as we are the children on one side, of the same grandparents."

"But you are not going,—you shan't go," declared Lulu hysterically.

"Yes, I am, and I must go *now*; I hear the cab coming round the sweep. I will write to you both, of course."

"And often, very often," urged Katie in a broken voice.

"Yes, often, very often, and some day under happier circumstances, I hope we shall meet again," bestowing several hearty kisses on her cousins (who seemed almost stunned by the suddenness of her departure), she dragged herself from their detaining arms, and hurried from the room,—desperately anxious to retain her self-command, to choke down her rising emotion, and to present a calm immovable mien to the remainder of

the family. But none of the other inmates came to wish her good-bye, save John Thomas, the footman, who handed her an envelope addressed to " Mrs. Bland." This was from his mistress. On his own behalf he added a knowing, and significant wink.

This envelope contained her salary, this, Helen discovered as she was rapidly driven down the avenue—six pounds, seven shillings and sixpence. How far would that go in the great London world? How was she to pay for Freddy?

Before she had gone any distance, the carriage came to an abrupt halt, and Mr. Despard's pink good-natured face appeared at the window. He had a note in his hand, and also appeared to have something on his mind.

" I thought I would say good-bye to you," he began, " and tell you how sorry I am that certain unfortunate matters have occurred. I wish to thank you, for all your kindness to my little Katie, and to ask you to accept this!"—tendering an envelope with rather a frightened expression on his genial countenance.

" Do you give it to your niece, or to Mrs. Bland?" inquired Helen, with surprising composure.

" Oh well, ahem! in fact,—well I suppose to Mrs. Bland," he answered with a stammer.

" Then as Mrs. Bland is not here, it is not in my power to accept your kind gift," returned Helen very stiffly. " The poor woman is dead, as I told you last night,—I see you are still sceptical about me,—that I am really Helen Browne, and come from Australia."

" I cannot believe that," he answered in the same key.

" Then I cannot accept your offer," leaning back as she spoke. " There is no more to be said except 'good-bye.' Please tell the coachman to drive on," and with

a little bow, Miss Browne was carried away, leaving Mr. Despard standing in the muddy road, his offering in his hand, and feeling for once in his life, very much like a fool!

A casual looker-on, would have imagined, that he was an unfortunate petitioner, and that she, was some great lady,—to have judged of the scene by a passing glance, —whereas he was the owner of the land on both sides of the road, and she, was a nobody, faring forth to fight the battle of life, with half a dozen sovereigns in her pocket.

Where was she to go? She must decide without loss of time. She thought of Mrs. Hogan, and caught at her name, as a drowning man clutches at a straw. She might be able to help her to some humble decent lodging in her neighbourhood; she would then look out for employment, endeavour to get orders for needle-work, and thus earn her bread, until the MacGregors came home. She opened her little bag, took out her uncle's letter, and read it over again. Little did the writer imagine, that when Helen would be reading it, she had just been cast out into the world as a strange dog is kicked into the street, and that far from being among her own kind relations, she was homeless and friendless,—without a roof to shelter her.

When Helen arrived in London, she drove direct to Mrs. Hogan, a long and intricate journey, paid and discharged the cab, and had her boxes carried into the hall,—to Mrs. Hogan's unqualified amazement. Her own shock-headed progeny were still happily at school, Hogan was at the Gas Works, and Helen had no audience for her remarkable tale but Mrs. Hogan and Freddy. There was no doubt whatever, that she was *not* Mrs. Bland, that important fact was plain to the matron, who listened to Helen's story, with her hands on her

hips, her eyes widely staring, and many and fervent ejaculations of astonishment, dismay, and pity. Yes, pity! She listened with the conviction, that every word that came to her ears was the gospel truth; then she burst into long repressed speech, and welcomed the stranger with hearty Irish hospitality, insisted on removing her hat, and administering that sovereign remedy for every ill, a strong, and long-brewed, cup of tea.

After tea and bread and butter,—thick chunks of bread, and highly-flavoured butter—had been consumed, Helen felt considerably better. Oh, what a relief and happiness, to be no longer another person! but to assume her own identity, and be in the company of one who did not think that she was telling lies.

Mrs. Hogan was one of those admirable people who never allow the proverbial grass to grow under their feet; and leaving Freddy in Helen's charge, hastened away to don a green cloth jacket, and a tweed cap, and then bestowing Freddy (*pro tem.*) upon her landlady, took Helen to inspect some quiet respectable lodgings within ten minutes' walk of her own apartments. They were very small, two tiny rooms looking out upon a sooty black wall, but they were clean, and cheap,—six shillings a week, with hot water in moderation, and one candle. So the bargain was struck! and Helen and her boxes were safely housed before nightfall, Hogan himself bringing them round upon a borrowed barrow. His indefatigable wife accompanied her protégée to a general grocery shop, and assisted her to lay in a supply of bread, salt butter, tea, sugar, and a couple of red herrings, and having escorted her to the door of 2, Alexandra Gardens, took leave of her for the night.

In a few days Helen had settled down in her new sphere, had unpacked her boxes under Mrs. Hogan's

own eyes, and that lady recognized and gave the detailed history of various familiar articles, that had belonged to Freddy's mother.

"That's the Shantung dress a friend sent her up from Madras,—she wore it at Badminton parties; and there's the serge, she wore in the rains, I mind it well, and seeing the Dirzee making it in the verandah."

"I'll cut it up for Freddy, it will make him his first trousers," said Helen cheerfully. "I might get a little coat out of the rest of it. I'm so glad my cousins out in Australia taught me to cut out, and sew."

"'Deed, and it's badly off the poor child is for clothes! he has hardly a rag to his back," said Mrs. Hogan; "and some of these petticoats and white gowns of hers, will come in finely for nightshirts."

So for some time Helen occupied her handy fingers upon Freddy's wardrobe, and Freddy became much attached to his "Mamma," as he called her, and spent a considerable part of his days, at Number 2, Alexandra Gardens. Why Gardens? one might ask? there was not a tree, or a blade of grass, within a quarter of a mile!

When Freddy's garments were completed, his new mamma turned her attention to fancy work, and bought some rather expensive materials, and embroidered a cushion cover in silk, upon white satin. Hogan, the handy, made her a sort of frame, and she worked hard at this for nearly three weeks, and when completed, it looked really lovely. Mrs. Hogan was loud in her raptures, and declared that "it would be dirt cheap for twenty pound;" but Helen thought *five* would be ample, and started off in high spirits to offer her goods in some of the West End shops, but alas! for her hopes! Some refused it altogether, and declined to even *look* at it! they had more already on hand than they could dispose of. Japanese and Chinese embroidery

was now the fashion, and English work was out of date! Some turned it over contemptuously, and criticized the design, or the colours, and no one offered her as much as the bare cost of the material. There was nothing for it, but to return home with a heavy heart, and try some other plan for making money. Meanwhile Helen's purse, was nearly empty; when her next week's rent was paid, all she would have in the world, would be five shillings, yes, just five shillings standing between her and absolute want; she had no winter jacket, and the cold seemed to penetrate her bones. A long tramp about the streets for three consecutive days,—striving to dispose of her work,—had a serious effect even upon her hardy constitution. For one whole fortnight she was confined to her bed with bronchitis, and a bad cough. Mrs. Hogan tended her with almost motherly solicitude, and having poured her troubles into that worthy woman's sympathetic ear (and informed her that she was now penniless, and a week in arrears with her rent), in her most matter-of-fact manner, Mrs. Hogan carried off to the pawnshop, her gold watch and chain, and her French costume, and on the proceeds of these, she bought herself a cloth jacket, a woolly coat for Freddy, and struggled on till the end of November.

Some time ago, when the shoe had begun to pinch too cruelly, she had written to her uncle. In an urgent appeal, she cast all pride and self-confidence to the winds, and implored him to send her immediately, at least a hundred pounds, telling him that she was in most desperate straits; had been turned out of doors by her aunt, and was struggling along in a miserable little lodging, and wearing, figuratively so to speak, the old shoes, and heavy troubles of the late Mrs. Bland!

Once, a hamper arrived, oh, such a welcome hamper!

from Katie and Lulu; bought out of their own money; money that more than once they had ventured to send and that more than once, had been gratefully, but firmly returned.

(Ay! returned! when perhaps for a whole week Helen had been keeping soul and body together, on no better fare than bread and tea,—with an occasional, and doubtful egg.) She made a little money by painting cards and colouring photographs, and for some water-colours which she had executed at Thornhurst and Cardew,—really artistic sketches of bits of the garden, or glades in the park. Sketches, that in a prominent shop and with a prominent name, would have fetched a good many guineas, for these, she dared not—considering her circumstances—refuse a proffered half-crown.

The hamper was more than welcome. It contained a ham,—what a stand-by! butter, eggs, tea, a pair of fowls, a large box of chocolate, and a huge family cake; the latter found special favour with Freddy, and the younger members of the Hogan family.

But even a substantial hamper cannot hold out for very long, and presently Helen and Freddy were, so to speak, living upon the cream-coloured dress and hat which she had worn the afternoon of the dance at Cardew. The parting with these garments had cost her a terrible pang; not for their becomingness or value, but because they were connected with the happiest day she had ever spent in her life.

How different Helen now looked to the radiant beauty at the dance; her dress was poor and shabby, her cheeks hollow, and her whole bearing seemed broken down, and depressed.

One evening, as she was sitting working by her handful of fire, making a dress for her landlady,—in lieu of a

week's rent,—the door of her room was burst open, and Mrs. Hogan appeared on the threshold, evidently in a state of the greatest excitement and consternation. Closing the door behind her, and gesticulating with almost tragic significance, she plunged into a seat and said : " The fat is in the fire this time, and no mistake ! Hogan saw him in Regent Street."

" Him ? Do you mean Major Bland ? " asked Helen.

" And who else ? " rejoined her companion. Hogan is mortal sure he had an eye on him, —and maybe he's followed him home, I wouldn't put it past him, for he knows that once he makes us out, he'll be able to lay a hand on you, and Freddy."

" But he has no power over *me*," said Helen resolutely ; " and as for Freddy, his mother implored me to keep them apart,—and I shall never give him up to his father."

" Talkin' is easy ! " said Mrs. Hogan, shaking her head, " and my dear life, you don't know the Major ; he is capable of any mortal thing, from putting you in an asylum, to cutting your throat."

" Then what's to be done, Mrs. Hogan ? have you any suggestion to make ? "

" Well, for one thing, I think you had best keep Freddy for the next couple of days, and when the Major comes ferreting round, I'll swear black and blue, he's not in my keeping. I expect if he took to the law, he'd be bound to get the charge of his own child,—only they might suspicion he wasn't all there. He certainly is as mad as anyone that's jailed up in Hanwell, when he has those fits on ; and 'tis in Hanwell he'd a right to be ! "

After a little discussion it was finally arranged that Freddy was to be made over to Helen for a short time.

For the first few days, she and he, remained close

prisoners in the house, but receiving no alarming news from Mrs. Hogan, she gradually ventured forth, and one fine afternoon, took the child for a run in Kensington Gardens, and to sail his penny boat upon the round pond. As she was slowly turning homewards, reluctant to exchange the nice bright gardens, and the crowds of happy-looking, well-dressed people, for her dismal little back room with its blank outlook,—horse-hair chairs, rickety sofa, and sparsely-furnished cupboard, — she heard quick footsteps coming up close behind her, and a familiar voice startled her, saying :

" I beg your pardon, but your little boy has dropped his boat ! " She raised her eyes, and there was Sir Rupert standing before her with Freddy's toy in his hand. He looked astounded, when she turned round, and he discovered that the shabby young woman he had followed, was actually the perfidious Mrs. Bland ; Mrs. Bland walking hand in hand with her little boy, Mrs. Bland completely unmasked, and yet, vilely and inexcusably as she had deceived him, he could not hate her as much as he felt was her due. There was something even yet, in her fair, but now haggard face, that allured and compelled him to pity her,—in spite of his common-sense. The brilliant beauty which for a short time had won her so much admiration,—not to speak of envy, hatred and malice, —had completely deserted her. Her cheeks were pale, her eyes looked sunken, and her clothes seemed to hang loosely on her wasted figure. Indeed, she was almost unrecognizable as the lovely Helen Brown, who had come to Cardew, and carried off his heart. He surveyed her with a look of something between horror and compassion in his steady dark eyes, and said :

" Is it you, really ! so we meet again."

"Yes," returned Helen, taking the little boat from his hand almost mechanically, "we meet again."

"I am sorry to see you looking so awfully ill," scrutinizing her face gravely. "I'm afraid you've had rather a bad time; will you not allow me to help you in some way? God knows," he added bitterly, "you deserve nothing from me; but still I can't bear to see you like this."

"You may keep your reproaches, and your compassion," replied Helen quickly; "put them away with your broken promises."

"Broken promises," he cried indignantly; "I like that, this comes uncommonly well from you!"

"Yes!" she insisted, "you promised to trust me come weal or woe,—trust me, as one of the angels themselves."

"And I am to hold to that trust, when I find that you are a married woman, when I actually meet you walking with your little boy? Yours must be an extraordinary mind, to imagine, that any sane man would be such an infernal fool."

"Yes! I know," she answered. "I would hide my story from you, when I ought to have told you the truth,—but I was conceited and stubborn, I wanted to enjoy a triumphant moment, to give you all a surprise, a great surprise,—and to turn the tables on my uncle, Angus MacGregor—who prophesied trouble —but never dreamed of *this* depth. At present, I am helpless, and almost friendless; at present your faith in me, would raise me out of the dust, and restore me almost to life itself!—You will not give it to me?"

She clasped her hands, and looked at him steadily, with a bright red spot on each pale cheek.

"You ask me to believe, that in spite of the evidence

of my senses, you are Helen Browne, an unmarried girl, and that all these staggering facts, are merely the inventions of the devil!" and he laughed rather grimly.

"I ask you to believe, even more than that," was the surprising answer; "have you not been told,—have you heard nothing from Thornhurst!"

"Nothing concerning *you*," he answered, "beyond the self-evident fact of your departure."

"Ah! then I shall tell you myself; I'm afraid I must tax your credulity still further, I am not only Helen Browne, but I am Mrs. Despard's niece from Australia."

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated, now firmly believing he had to deal with a lunatic, and surveying her with grave apprehension; "why she died coming home on board ship."

"No, no, she did not; as a sort of crazy joke, she changed places with another Miss Browne, a fellow passenger; but she did not know, that this Miss Browne was travelling under an assumed name, and that she was really a Mrs. Bland. Mrs. Bland is dead, but," with an expressive gesture, "Helen Browne is *here!*"

"Yes! so I see, and taking charge of Mrs. Bland's child," he rejoined with a glance of ironical significance.

"Yes, I understand you," she said with a sigh, "you think that I am telling lies, or that I am mad, —and appearances bear you out; but black as they look, I have a sure conviction, that the light is coming, —and will come soon. Yes! it will come, be sure of that; also be sure, that you and I, have spoken together for the last time," and turning abruptly away, she walked off rapidly, with the little boy on thin spindly legs, trotting beside her.

Once she had reached the shelter of her own four walls, Helen cast off her hat, and, burying her face in

her hands, burst into such a torrent of weeping, that Freddy was frightened, and wept and howled for sympathy. However, Helen had soon to dry her eyes, it seemed that she couldn't even afford the luxury of tears; but when Freddy had had his supper, and been warmly tucked up in her bed, she came and sat alone before the dying fire, not weeping now, or giving vent to any outward signs of grief, nor that an old and vital wound had opened afresh that day, but only stunned, and cold, and still.

CHAPTER XXIV

ENTERING her little sitting-room, one dusky afternoon, a few days later,—with Freddy clinging to her hand, Helen found to her great amazement, that she had a visitor. Squarely confronting her, occupying her only armchair, with his elbows resting on the table, was a man in a loose grey suit, an individual with a bald head, a red face, and a lowering countenance. In a second she had recognized him, as the original of the photograph she had seen in Mrs. Bland's album. Here was Major Bland! and he had not come alone—but was accompanied by—a heavy atmosphere of Scotch whisky.

"Well, madam!" he began in a harsh, grating voice, "so I have unearthed you at last! and an infernal lot of trouble you have given me; a deuced sight more than you are *worth*,—but I was determined to nail you, if you were above ground; so I employed a detective."

A dead silence ensued for at least two minutes. Helen, whose knees were shaking under her, hastily pulled forward a chair, and sat down.

"And that's the brat, I suppose?" he continued, indicating Freddy with his finger; "looks like a white rat. Now I should just like to know, what you've got to say for yourself?"

Helen was seated with her back to the light, with her face in deep shadow. It was evident, that Major Bland was under the impression that he was speaking to his wife,—she would undeceive him without delay.

"I presume you are Major Bland?" she said at last.

"Good heavens, this is a rare joke!" he ejaculated, with a loud laugh. "I presume, I am, madam; I presume that you are speaking to your husband into the bargain, and I presume, that the sooner you pack up your traps, and come along with him, the better,—or—I presume, that it will be worse for you," responded Major Bland, —who was evidently delighted with his own wit. "I've a cab at the corner of this den of thieves, so look sharp!"

"You are labouring under a monstrous mistake, I'm not your wife," said Helen, in a trembling voice; "if you will wait an instant you will see, that you are speaking to a complete stranger!"

She rose and, going over to the little rickety chiffonier, arranged, and lit a small reading lamp, and placed it between them on the table.

"Now am I your wife?" she demanded, standing before him, and removing her hat.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed, half rising in his chair, "the trip to Europe has done you some good,—it has improved your appearance. Upon my soul, you are better-looking than I thought; not half so fiddle-headed as you used to be! In old days, you used to remind me of a half-drowned cat."

Helen gazed at him in stupefied silence, she looked into his face with horrified fascination. Surely it was

not the countenance of a sane person? the restless eyes were continually rolling about, there was a strange, continuous twitching of his lips! and his expression fluctuated between fiery passion, and vacant imbecility.

"You know perfectly well, that I'm not your wife, you know that you have never seen me before," said Helen in a soothing voice, "you have made a mistake, —your wife is dead."

"As if you were likely to come over me in that way," he returned with a look of indescribable cunning; "no, no, I'm not quite such a fool as all that! I have the whole of your career at my fingers' ends, from the day that you went down the hill, and took the train to Madras,—a three days' journey. In Madras, you passed yourself off as Miss Browne,—that was a nice thing for a married woman to do! Oh, yes! I know *all* about you, I've been to the country, I've seen Mrs. Despard, 'twas she gave me your address; and now I've got you fast. Pooh! talking's dry work, got any brandy? no, I know you; not a drop of anything to drink, of course. Well, come here now and sit on my knee, and give me a kiss. Where's your affection? Hurry up and look sharp,—or you know what you'll get!"

"Stop," cried Helen imperatively, "listen to me, you've said enough. This idea of yours is madness, a delusion," and forthwith she poured forth her story with vehement rapidity, pausing every now and then, to take breath, and steadying herself with both hands, grasping the edge of the table.

"Capital! capital!" he shouted, when she had concluded, "encore! encore!" hammering with his knuckles. "By Jove, Rachel, you'd make your fortune on the stage, I declare you would! You want to prove a what you call it, an 'alibi!'—but you can't! Why

are you here with my child? I know him by the cut under his eye, I can swear to that! If you are not my wife, why are you here? Come, come, ha! ha! ha!" with a mad laugh, "that's a poser! you can see for yourself, that it won't *wash*. Come! get out of this dog-hole of a place, put on your hat, and stick your things into a bag; I'm staying at the 'Oriental.'"

"Go with you," cried Helen, now distracted between fear, and fury, "never! I am nothing to you,—your wife, who was my friend, is dead."

Here he interrupted her with an oath of frightful import, and made as though he would strike her across the table.

"You may strike me, you may kill me,—but you shall never take me from this place; sooner than go with you, I'd throw myself off London Bridge."

"Oh! the old story! the old story!" he sneered; "why you were always talking of killing yourself, but you never had the *pluck* to do it; come, let us have no more of this rot! What's that brat roaring for? I'll make him roar; I'll give him something to cry for!" advancing suddenly on the terrified Freddy. In doing so, he gave the rickety old table a violent shove, which resulted in its complete collapse; the lamp was upset, the kerosene oil spreading in liquid flames all over the rotten old carpet,—which was instantly in a blaze, and burnt like tinder. Helen snatched up Freddy, and flew downstairs, followed by her tormentor, who was shouting for assistance, with oaths, and imprecations of a most awful description. Helen rushed bareheaded out into the street, down a little dark alley, then up another, and into a tumble-down mews, where she found a cabman in the act of dragging forth his night cab,—a burly old individual with a pipe in his mouth.

"May I come in?" she asked, gasping for breath; "may I stay in this coach house for a little while?"

Cabby took his pipe out of his mouth, and surveyed her dispassionately for a few seconds.

"The police are after you, aren't they?" he said.

"Oh, no! no!" she panted.

"Who then?" he demanded magisterially.

"A madman! a lunatic."

"All right then, Missus,—you can stay."

And stay she did. She and Freddy crouched together on a heap of damp straw, watched the cabby prepare for his night job, clean up his lamps, dust his cushions and mats, finally lead forth a venerable and reluctant steed from an adjoining stable, harness it between the shafts, and drive away.

Helen sat shivering with Freddy asleep in her lap, till the neighbouring clocks, one after another, struck the hour of ten, then she arose very stiff and tired, and with considerable trepidation made her way back to 2, Alexandra Gardens.

The door was opened for her by the landlady, in a state of flaming indignation; holding a candle above her head, she called out shrilly:

"So you've come back, have you? Pretty doings, nice goings on, that cursing, raging madman, that visitor of yours, your husband, nearly made a bonfire of this blessed house."

"Is he gone?" asked Helen in a whisper.

"Oh, yes, he's gone, and don't you let me catch him here again, that's all. He threw me a five-pound note, but what's that? What's a five-pound note against a new carpet, and a lamp?"

Helen couldn't help thinking, that considering their condition,—it was a good deal.

"And he said he was coming again to-morrow, and

when you were not to be found, he foamed and cursed just desperate, and the awful work we had with the fire, the smell of the room would have choked you; only I bethought me of the blankets off your bed, the whole house would have been in a blaze. You can't go up," detaining Helen as she spoke, "you must just stay below- while I give you your tea, you look perished!"

"I'll put Freddy to bed first, and then I'll come down, but I must just go round to Mrs. Hogan, before anything."

Mrs. Hogan concurred with Helen, in thinking that she must make an immediate move, and find a more secure hiding-place. The asylum was discovered in the top garret of that good woman's lodging, and here, for several days, Helen remained a close prisoner, not daring to go out, spending her time in mending the little Hogans' very dilapidated wardrobes, and in pacing her narrow garret in paroxysms of frenzy; wringing her hands, and inveighing against her hard lot. A beggar! a prisoner! and abandoned by her relations. Her heart felt hot within her, when she thought of her Uncle Angus MacGregor. What right had he to withhold his testimony, and postpone acknowledging her identity, from month to month? He must have received the urgent appeal, she had sent to him from Thornhurst, imploring him to forward money,—if he could do nothing else? How dare he treat her in this fashion,—and keep her in abject want? Probably at the back of her uncle's mind was the idea, that she was receiving her just punishment, for taking the law into her own hands, and claiming against his will, a whole year of independence! He was hard, arbitrary, and inflexible by nature. She had agreed, to stand or fall by the result of that year. If it had been a *good*

year, she would have scored; but it had been a very bad year, and her uncle had scored! She had always known him to be a just man, although he was severe: possibly he could not forgive her for failing to accept her cousin Hector! Within another month, she would be of age, by that time things *must* happen! She would demand reinstatement, and identification, though without money or friends, and being in another person's character, how helpless she felt. If her uncle or aunt, had the remotest idea of the straits to which she had been reduced during the last two months,—they would have been overwhelmed. As for herself, it was a period that was burnt into her memory for all time. Now, she had seen how the poor lived, and been herself among the poorest; she had known how good they were to one another, had witnessed little acts of generosity,—that to them meant as much as thousands of pounds to a wealthy individual. Of course some of them were improvident, idle, and drunken,—others were as so many shining lights, in a dark place.

Among these shining lights, the brilliance of Mrs. Hogan was conspicuous!

* * * * * *

As matters were now at their worst, they did begin to mend, and to mend almost as rapidly as they had once fallen to pieces!

The first news of importance came from Mrs. Hogan, who burst into the garret one afternoon, newspaper in hand.

"See here!" she cried, "look at this! he will trouble you no more," pointing to a paragraph, with a very black forefinger, "Read it for yourself!"

" Yesterday, Mr. Martin, the Coroner, held an inquest on the body of Major R. Bland, late an officer of His Majesty's Indian Army, who in a moment of mental aberration, jumped out of a window in the Oriental Hotel, and was taken up quite dead! It appeared, that the deceased, had been greatly addicted to the use of stimulants, and also that his mind had been affected by the result of a sunstroke received in India. The Jury returned a verdict, in accordance with the evidence, 'Committed suicide when in an unsound state of mind!' "

Helen read the paragraph over twice, and then laid down the paper without a word. She felt as if she were choking, she could not articulate.

" So now you are free, you see," cried Mrs. Hogan; " there is no need for you to be jailed up any longer. Just put your hat on and come out and take a mouthful of fresh air. Goodness knows, you look as if you wanted it badly. We'll go along the road, and buy some roast chestnuts for the children. Hogan's gone to the hotel to speak about Freddy, and to see the family lawyer, and all that; I'm thinking he'll be no more expense or trouble to you now," and Mrs. Hogan's prediction proved to be correct.

In a day or two, Freddy was removed from Helen's care, and placed in the charge of a lady living in the neighbourhood of London, who according to an advertisement was " The wife of a retired physician, who wished for the entire charge of one little boy to bring up with her own. Liberal terms expected; highest references given and required! "

CHAPTER XXV

AND soon Helen's troubles were over altogether. A thin blue envelope with a foreign stamp, bearing the Marseilles post-mark, brought her the news, that Mr. and Mrs. MacGregor and Jean had arrived by the French steamer, and hoped to be in London, as soon as the letter itself!

"Come to us at once," the letter said; "do not lose an *hour*, we are longing to see you."

The invitation seemed almost a mockery. Was it likely she would lose an instant, in casting off grinding poverty, a load of care, the identity of another person, —an accumulation that had weighed her to the earth; no, no, she wouldn't lose an instant. This very morning, nay this very hour, she would go to the Langham Hotel and reclaim her freedom.

Helen flew downstairs with her letter in her hand, to impart her good news to Mrs. Hogan,—who was busily washing up her breakfast things, in a roomy yellow bowl.

"Deary, deary me, well, I am glad," she exclaimed with her wet hands on her hips, "that I am; for sure and certain, you've had a frightful time of it, for a real born lady; but let's see now what are ye going to wear, going among all your friends. Your hat was burnt the other night; you can't go bareheaded, can you? You might take the loan of my tweed cap," and she laughed. "There's a girl upstairs has got a real smart toque with a green plume, you might take a wear out of that!"

" No, no," replied Helen, " I've half-a-crown left ; I was keeping it for coal, but I'll just go out and invest in a sailor hat at one and elevenpence ; with that, and a veil, I shall be all right ! "

Having purchased the hat, inked her gloves, brushed her dress and jacket, Helen set forth on foot, and about twelve o'clock presented herself at the Langham Hotel.

Such a shabby, indeed threadbare visitor, was a most unusual sight, asking, too, for people who occupied one of the best suites of rooms, wealthy colonials, who had only arrived that morning ! However, there was no help for it ; she was very persistent, and spoke like a lady ! Ten to one some poor relation coming to beg or borrow, before they had had time to turn round ! Little did the waiter dream, that he was conducting upstairs, the owner of many thousands a year.

Mr. and Mrs. MacGregor and Jean (Elspeth was married), had just finished a very late breakfast, when Helen was ushered in. As she stood for a moment on the threshold, they stared at her in wide-eyed amazement ! This shabby girl, with pinched features, and colourless cheeks, was this Helen Browne, who had sailed for England just a year ago ! Impossible !

" Uncle Angus and Aunt Netty, don't you know me ? " she asked at last, in a faint voice !

Yes, it was her voice all right ! and in another second she and her aunt were sobbing in each other's arms.

Exclamations, and lamentations, and osculations, lasted for quite ten minutes ; at the end of that time Helen found herself seated on the sofa between her aunt and her cousin, whilst her uncle stood opposite, in attitudes of the closest attention, whilst with a faltering voice, and some tears, she related the history

of her dilemma and of her terrible experience from first to last,—being interrupted from time to time by ejaculations of surprise, disgust, anger, and pity, from her auditors.

When the revelation was at end, Mr. MacGregor set to and abused himself with most hearty goodwill. He was an idiot, an obstinate, old, short-sighted fool; as for Short and Sharp, his wide Scotch vocabulary contained no name that could adequately convey his opinion of them. Then Helen's own relations came in for some severe strictures, and in fact, there was a good deal of emphatic talking, and letting off of steam. Angus MacGregor, who was still lame, had limped up and down the room, and swore to himself a good deal *sotto voce*. Evidently he felt relieved, and presently coming over to his wife, said with great emphasis:

"Maggie, the *first* thing to do for the lassie, is to get her something to eat; the second is, to buy her some clothes; the third is to take her away from those lodgings, and pension that old woman, and the fourth is to go and flay, Short and Sharp, this very afternoon."

"All right, my dear Angus, all right! one thing at a time. Now, Helen, you must have some lunch, then we will go into Oxford Street, close by, and find you some ready-made clothes, after that we will all call on Mrs. Hogan. All but your uncle," she added. "I doubt if he will be able to keep away from the lawyers, for more than half an hour."

How odd it seemed to Helen, to be seated once more at a well-appointed table, eating such unfamiliar dainties, as roast chicken, and bread sauce. As she ate, her relatives sat round, and talked to her. It was only when her last letter came, that her uncle had any idea of the serious nature of her situation! Hitherto, he

had believed that she was getting on all right at Thornhurst, and he confessed, " I will not deny, that I thought a little discipline, would do you good, my girl, and I made up my mind, that I wouldn't, as we agreed, lift a finger to help you, until the year was out ; but your letter in September, put a very different complexion upon the matter. You were about to be turned adrift, so we made up our minds to come home *at once*. It took me a couple of weeks to straighten out matters, and here we are ! I posted you off a cheque in a letter to Short and Sharp,—but I suppose you've heard nothing of them."

" I don't think that's their fault this time," she answered, " because they would not know where to find me."

" I suppose anyone could be found, if they were properly looked for," said her uncle ; this statement is certainly open to debate, although on the other hand, it was true that Helen had been tracked down, and discovered by that terrible Major Bland.

In the course of conversation, the engagement of Hector was announced ; he was marrying the daughter of a very wealthy Woolbroker, and the engagement evidently gave the family most profound satisfaction.

" Of course, Helen, we all hoped for something *else*," said his mother, " you know that ; but I think after all, this match will turn out well ! If you had married Hector, you'd always have had an eye on this country. I believe your English blood, would have come out there, and you'd never have settled down to spend your life happily in Australia. Now tell us the truth ! Which country do you like best ? "

" I cannot give you a truthful answer to that question yet," said Helen, with a smile ; " so far, I have not seen much of England, and that only from a schoolroom

window, or a slum. I am only too willing to admit and confess to you all, that this dreadful experience was my own fault. I positively went out of my way to cheat fortune, and she gave me a very rough rebuff!"

"Well let's all hope, that she will smile on you now," said her uncle, rising. "Here's some money for you," taking several notes from a case. Away with you now, with your aunt and cousin, and get yourself fitted out in some reasonable-looking garments."

Reasonable-looking garments were soon procured in Oxford Street. Helen was invested in a smart coat, and skirt, a blouse, another fur coat, a muff, a distinguished hat, and gloves and shoes to correspond.

Within an hour and a half, from the time she had entered a well-known establishment, she walked out of it completely equipped, and transformed to all appearance, into the rich Miss Browne! No wonder the waiter did not recognize her at the "Langham," no wonder that Mrs. Hogan hardly knew her, when she drove up to make her adieux.

Needless to say, that a substantial present was made to that worthy woman,—a present to grease the wheels of life, and make them run with delightful smoothness for the remainder of her days. She had been Helen's only help, her only friend through those black months, and many a time, she blest the day, when she had first seen Miss Browne!

The MacGregors were a very energetic family, and determined to make the most of their time in England. At first all their attention was concentrated on, and devoted to Helen. Her aunt took her to see a first-rate doctor, who found that she was in a delicate and run-down condition, and recommended a couple of months in the South of France, and ordered her port

wine milk, and a tonic Her uncle had lost not an hour in calling upon Short and Sharp. A very stormy interview was the result; they, pointing out, that they had only done their duty, in refusing to acknowledge an absolutely unknown young woman without credentials, he, declaring, that for months his niece Miss Browne, a girl of great wealth, had been forced to live in abject want (as it happened, the lawyers were right, and he was wrong! He had taken no steps until now, to prove the young lady's identity). Helen's boxes were handed over, brought back to the "Langham," and unsealed, and she had the satisfaction of beholding belongings, from which she had been separated for many months—articles she hadn't seen since the day of the fearful storm in the Mediterranean, and the night when Rachel Bland had died!

In a surprisingly short time, Helen lost her wan and colourless appearance. Colonials are extraordinarily clannish, Mr. and Mrs MacGregor picked up a good many old friends in London, and persuaded one or two of them to accompany them to Mentone, where they made quite a large and merry party at the Hôtel du Louvre.

Only a fortnight after her departure from Alexandra Gardens and Helen found herself in what appeared to be, a Heaven upon Earth! Here was the sun, a blue sky, a blue sea, a background of picturesque mountains, a surrounding of gardens, full of palms and lovely flowers, and any quantity of gay sojourners. Everything was new, everything was interesting, she and her cousins went donkey rides and picnics, they lunched at Cap Martin, and even invaded the rooms at Monte Carlo. The first impression of those gilded halls, was "that it was all very shocking, and that the sooner, they departed the better." However, the

place proved to have a certain fascination; even as spectators, there was much to astonish and interest, and what was more, they encountered quite a number of friends, who did not appear to be the least ashamed of themselves, or to think, that there was anything wicked or out of the common, in planting down cart-wheels at roulette, or gold, at trente et quarante. One or two girl friends of the MacGregors boasted of their winnings, and declared, that when they made as much as a hundred francs, they would rush out at once, and invest in a hat, or a lace blouse, so, as they said, "whatever happened, they were *that* to the good!"

Helen, who had not any acquaintances, looked on, and made mental notes. Some of the players took the matter seriously. She noticed one man get up, push back his chair, and leave the table with a face as white as death. She listened to a terrific altercation between an old hag in a black toque, and a good-looking French officer, who accused the old person of having stolen his stake,—which was a fact. To end the wrangle, "the table," as usual, paid.

Then a friend of her cousin Jean's, joined her, a smart young married woman from Sydney, who was well acquainted with Monte Carlo; she poinsed out some of the celebrities.

That man with the light beard was Prince Malchikoff, who had twice broken the Bank, that is to say, the table he played at. The painted woman sitting opposite, with the gold bag and the enormous diamond earrings, was the celebrated "Thérèse," the dancer. The table near the door was known as "the suicide's table;" she herself had seen a suicide, though not in that particular spot. A man had come and seated himself beside her, in a shady nook in the gardens, there was a shot, a little smoke, and he

tumbled forward, dead. Helen looked, as she was, horrified, and her companion calmly said:

"Oh, you will get used to that sort of thing, when you've been here a month or two; you see some very strange people in the rooms. Now look at this grey-haired, wizened old man, sitting opposite! He comes here every day, plays for about ten minutes, and then takes his departure. Do just watch him!"

The old gambler produced from his pocket a little silver figure,—apparently of some saint.—This he placed in front of him. He next produced a thick roll of notes, then he began to play. His stakes were heavy, his decisions, prompt. In a short time, notes and gold kept flowing towards him, it was evidently "a good day," and the little silver figure was propitious! At the end of about a quarter of an hour, he picked it up, and thrust it into his pocket, collected and stowed away his very considerable winnings, offered his chair to an eager neighbour, and took his departure!

Besides the Casino, there was the Pigeon Shooting,—which Mr. MacGregor and some men friends attended,—and there were concerts, and luncheons and teas at the Hôtel de Paris, or the Hermitage. The hours simply flew; what with picnics and excursions into Italy, and hotel dances, it was the end of March, and they seemed to have arrived but the week before.

Her aunt and uncle were anxious to go to Scotland, and look up their friends and relations,—whom they had not seen for years, and it became rather a question, of what they were to do with Helen? Not that they were not very willing to have her company, and these Scotch relatives were also her kinsfolk, but she seemed more disposed to remain further South, and perhaps to see a little of the London season,—perhaps to see, by chance, a little of Sir Rupert Lynn!

Among their acquaintances at Mentone, there was a certain Lady Lesborough, the kind and amiable, but somewhat needy widow of an Earl, whose title was now extinct. She and Angus MacGregor belonged to the same clan and family, and she offered to take charge of Helen Browne, who was also her cousin, and bring her out, and be a mother to her, while her relations were away in Bonnie Scotland. She liked Helen, the daughter of Ailsa MacGregor, and believed they would get on together well. Of course the girl would pay,—she did not want to be grasping, but if she took Helen in, she could not, as usual, let her shabby old house for the season. She must hire carriage horses, and have a couple of extra servants. She and Mrs. MacGregor put their heads together, and made a bargain! A bargain, which was to the advantage of both.

Lady Lesborough had numbers of friends, she moved in a good set, and Helen would find herself well launched, and chaperoned, and the old lady would experience an agreeable fullness of her purse; no occasion to think twice about new chintz covers, or the footman's livery, and this pretty colonial girl, the daughter of her own kinswoman, with a solid seven thousand a year, increasing at an almost fabulous rate, was just the sort of girl that some of her dowager contemporaries were looking for, as a prospective daughter-in-law!

By the middle of April, Helen was established in Lowndes Square. She rode in the Park, she went to dances, theatres, Hurlingham, and the Opera, and made an immense number of new and agreeable acquaintances, including the great MacGregor connection.

On the afternoon of the second Drawing-room in May, Lady Lesborough's high-stepping bays were to be seen, prancing up to the side entrance of Buckingham

Palace, and presently Miss Helen Browne and her chaperon, were among a great crowd of other trained and feathered ladies, waiting to pass into His Majesty's presence!

Lady Lesborough was a very tall, erect, somewhat raw-boned old dame, who reared her head, and tossed her plumes with an air of disapproval, as her eyes fell upon some vulgar climbers, in her immediate neighbourhood. In turning about and stretching her aristocratic old neck, she caught sight of Mrs. Despard, and her daughter Blanche.

"That girl not married yet? Up in town again," was her mental comment; but she merely said, "Oh, Mrs. Despard, how do you do? these crushes become more fearful every year, and, Miss Despard, how charming you are looking! This is nothing new to you,—not like my young friend, here," indicating the back of Helen's head.

Helen, who was perfectly unconscious of the mine in her neighbourhood, was gazing at some of the most noted London beauties, who had been pointed out to her by one of the Officers of the Royal Body Guard.

"Oh, really, Lady Lesborough," returned Mrs. Despard, "I did not know that you had a daughter,—or is it a grand-daughter?"

"No, I'm sorry to say I have no children; this young friend is a cousin of mine, and," lowering her voice significantly, "a great heiress!"

"Indeed!" returned Mrs. Despard, casting a curious glance at Lady Lesborough's protégée. She was tall and slight, and wore the regulation débutante's white dress, also a magnificent necklace of "oh, such beautifully matched, round, glossy, pearls." Would she never turn her head, which was still persistently held in the opposite direction, only one little pink ear, and the

outline of a fine neck and throat being visible. Yes she was turning now, turning her face slowly round, in order to behold some splendid new arrival, and Mrs. Despard could scarcely restrain an involuntary exclamation, when she found herself face to face with her ci-devant governess, Miss Helen Browne. Helen was no less surprised at the rencontre; the colour suddenly faded from her lips, but she looked steadily into Mrs. Despard's incredulous, horrified countenance, and turning away in the most pointed manner, administered the "cut direct."

Blanche's lynx eyes had not been blind to this dramatic little scene; at first, she could hardly trust them, she stared and stared and stared again, with unwinking audacity. "Yes, there was no mistake about it, it *was* Helen Browne!" She recognized her by a little mole on her right temple, recognized her past all doubt! But how did she come here, a magnificent young beauty in Court dress, and priceless pearls, crushing her into the background, by the blaze of her distinguished appearance? It really looked as if there was some kind of truth in her story, after all. Lady Lesborough was the last person in London to take up with a penniless adventuress! Her young protégée's credentials must have been unimpeachable, to pass her critical scrutiny.

Later, when mother and daughter had stripped off their finery, and dismissed their maids, they forgathered to discuss a most disagreeable situation. In short, the real Helen Browne, an heiress, and their relative, whom they had turned out of doors, last September, almost penniless, and entirely friendless.

"She will have nothing to say to us now, that's plain," said Mrs. Despard impressively; "she cut me dead."

"Oh, she may come round," returned her daughter;

" she is devoted to Lulu and Katie, we can work on her through *them*. I daresay when she has cooled down a bit, and when the past has faded a little, she may be glad to let bygones be bygones."

" She didn't look in a melting mood to-day at any rate," responded Mrs. Despard! " How stupid of me never to have seen it! Now that I know who she really *is*, it strikes me, that that girl is the image of her father,—amazingly like my family,—the same high-bred air."

" She's not in the least like *you*, mamma," interrupted her daughter impatiently.

" Not now perhaps, but as I was," persisted Mrs. Despard. " I was tall and slight, with a creamy fair skin, just her style. Yes, I remember at the County Ball,"—and here Mrs. Despard rambled into reminiscences of her own all-conquering career—reminiscences which fell unnoticed upon her companion's ears.

Miss Blanche was leaning back in a low chair, her hands clasped behind her head, her eyes riveted upon the fire.

" Come, Blanche," said her mother, suddenly observing that her conversation had been a mere soliloquy, " what on earth are you dreaming about, your mind seems to be in the skies? "

" I was only turning over this amazing business in my head, mother," transferring her eyes to her parent, " and wondering what Rupert will say! "

" Rupert! Yes! And your father,—Blanche! How on earth are we to tell him? We must leave it to Katie, I positively dare not do it myself. Well, it is certainly a most disagreeable affair, and we shall be meeting her everywhere. There is two o'clock striking, so run away, my dear, and go to bed. Talking and thinking, will not make the matter any better! "

CHAPTER XXVI

MOST people are well acquainted with the appearance of Rotten Row in the beginning of May,—the very height of the London Season. The Park was looking lovely one fine morning some years ago; green, fresh, and shady; thronged with hundreds of the fashionable world, some walking, some riding, some gossiping, and some flirting. The promenade beside the Ride was gay, with pretty frocks, and sunshades, and the Ride itself was crowded. Portly papas, and pretty daughters, girls in parties of three,—followed by their grooms,—married couples, unmarried couples, and not a few children, were walking, and cantering to and fro, the subject of criticism or admiration, with many of the loungers, with their arms on the rails.

Right up the middle of the Ride Sir Rupert Lynn was walking his streaming horse,—he had been "taking it out" of the animal, and himself. He was alone, and wore a moody, discontented expression. "Man evidently delights him not, nor woman either," and yet he is in far better circumstances (as far as money is concerned) than last year. His uncle, who died at Naples, has left him a substantial sum in the Funds; mortgages no longer press upon his mind, the horse he bestrides, is a three-hundred guinea hack (and he was justified in the outlay). He has a comfortable banking account—health, wealth, good looks, lots of friends—why then, is he not more cheerful? Why does black care sit behind him on his satin-coated thoroughbred?

He is wishing for the unattainable ; he is discontented with his life, a large mote obscures his vision, and were we to give that mote a name, we would call it " Helen."

He has travelled far since we have seen him last, but travel where he may, he cannot eradicate her from his mind. Anger, misgiving, love, that will not be quenched or silenced, are constantly struggling within him. Slowly he threads his way through the crowd, exchanging bows and nods and " how d'ye do's " with numbers of acquaintances.

He was revolving in his mind whether the game was worth the candle ? whether this idle, lotus-eating life of pleasure, is not sickeningly monotonous,—ten times worse to endure, than the solitudes of the Andes or the Rocky Mountains. A long shooting trip—a life of intense hard, physical work, and continual excitement —might cure him. He would not lend himself to such women's weakness any longer ; he would see Torrens, and have a talk to him about an expedition. Torrens was always game for starting off to the other end of the world at about two hours' notice.

Just then his reflections were suddenly interrupted by a riding party cantering briskly past—a stout, square, elderly man on a large bay hunter, a smart young fellow that he knew in the Guards, and between them, a pretty slim girl on a beautiful chestnut mare.

Something in her laugh, the colour of her hair, and the shape of her side face (of which he had only caught a passing glance) reminded him of Helen—yes, of Helen ! But what infatuation—what madness ! His brain must be softening. Was it at all likely, he asked himself ironically, that Helen Browne would be mounted on a valuable thoroughbred, would be an accomplished horsewoman, in the gayest of spirits, riding with an Earl on her right hand through Rotten

Row?—Helen, whom he had last seen sunken in beggary, steeped to the very lips in misery, with actually the ghastly word *want* written in legible characters on her sunken features? Could Helen and that laughing girl be one? No more probability in the idea than that the Albert Memorial would descend, and move bodily down the Park!

Thus arguing with himself, Rupert put his horse into a sharp canter, and by some irresistible impulse followed the trio up the Row—followed, but could not overtake them. They kept ahead at a good pace. How admirably the girl rode! How squarely she sat on her horse! Then they suddenly turned out of the Park, and were lost to sight among the streaming mob of carriages, and cars.

* * * * * *

Two evenings later Sir Rupert found himself at the Opera—more by the wish of a friend, than by any desire of his own.

This friend was an old school-fellow whom he had not met for years—a school-fellow who had sought and found his fortune in the Argentine, and recently taken a run home to see all the old places and the old people, and was enjoying himself with the zest of a school-boy in his holidays; had all the little bits of new gossip and scandal at his fingers' ends, knew the appearance of most of the celebrities—male and female—and was in every way making the most of his time.

He kept constantly staring about the house, and drawing his companion's most unwilling attention to this, that, or the other.

A late arrival, several late arrivals, in a large box to their right, claimed his marked interest. After

gazing at them for some three minutes, he turned round, and tapped Sir Rupert with his finger, and said, in an eager whisper :

" Do you see those people just come in, in the box to your right—elderly lady and gentleman, two girls and young fellow ? I'll tell you a queer story about the girl—the fair one. Look at her now, she is coming to the front ! Awfully pretty, is she not ? "

Sir Rupert turned his head with languid indifference in the desired direction, and his careless glance fell upon *Helen* !

Yes, undoubtedly Helen this time. He seized his opera-glass ; he could hardly hold it, his hand shook so helplessly.

By a great effort, he steadied himself, and gazed once more at the third box on the second tier.

Yes, there she was, looking well and rich, and radiantly happy. Her colour had returned, her face was wreathed in smiles. She was listening with evident amusement to something that that jabbering young puppy behind her was leaning forward, and imparting.

She wore a white gown and a necklace of pearls, and a prodigious bouquet lay on the front of the box before her, as well as a mother-of-pearl opera-glass.

" Well ! " said his friend cheerfully. " You have had a rare good look, and now what do you think of her, eh ? "

An unintelligible muttering, lost in his moustache, was the only reply his companion was able to vouch-safe him ; but this did not seem to matter in the least, for he proceeded eagerly :

" She's a Miss Browne, a colonial heiress, with pots of money, my dear fellow—thousands a year. Tavy is going in for her, and lots of others, but, from all I can hear, she's not easy to please ! "

"And where did she come from?" asked his now composed and deeply interested auditor.

"Well, that's the queer part of the business!"

"Oh! then there is something queer about her?"

"Not that, exactly; but she did the oddest, maddest thing any girl, not out of her mind, ever carried out before."

"Yes!"

"She was coming home to her relations—strangers—in the character of an heiress, relations to receive her with open arms. You know, of course!"

"Well, well, go on!" impatiently.

"Unfortunately it struck her, that she would put their affection to the test; so she changed places on board-ship with their governess that was to be, and the governess died before they landed, and consequently she was left in no end of a hole. No one would believe that she was an heiress—neither her solicitors, nor her own people, nor any one—so she had to work for her bread in real earnest. Then she got engaged to some fellow, I believe, and all was going on swimmingly till this governess's—the dead one's—child turned up, and naturally everyone saddled it on *her*. She was turned out-of-doors. Needless to say, her lover washed his hands of her, and she was left to her own resources to support this brat as best she could; and then this other woman's husband appeared on the scene—came home from India a raving madman, set fire to her lodgings, and then committed suicide. Sounds like a melodrama, eh?"

But Sir Rupert's lips had lost the power of speech.

"Her Australian relatives arrived, and lifted her back into her proper sphere. I heard it all from MacGregor himself,—that old buffer there in the back of the box. He is her uncle and guardian. She was

actually starving! Wouldn't believe it to look at her now, eh? Of course he's awfully down on her English relations, and the solicitors. Wonder what the lover feels like now, eh? Rather sorry for himself, eh?"

The lover's feelings could not be expressed as he sat in rigid silence, listening to this terrible tale.

When the curtain was raised for the second act, he got up, and left the house.

He went down and stood in the street, and tried to collect his senses.

Passers-by stared with amused amazement at the tip-top swell in evening-dress, who was standing bare-headed in the moonlight.

"So Helen was right all through! really Helen Browne, the heiress, and no impostor." Her piteous appeal came back to him now, "Won't you believe in me, Rupert?"

The words seemed branded into his heart with hot iron. He had scoffed at her confession, laughed at her pretensions, and cast her off. Yes, in spite of his protestations of never-dying faith; but who would believe, that any girl would have been capable of such an act of mad extravagant folly?

Now she had regained her identity, her friends, and her thousands. Now she had opera boxes, thorough-breds, and pearls; and now, of course she would never again speak to him! And yet, now that he knew her to be what he had at first believed—as pure and unsullied as the lilies of the field—he felt that he loved her ten times better than formerly. Not because she was rich and desirable in every way,—as with a sudden flush to his forehead he told himself that all the world would suppose! No! but simply because she was, and would be the only woman, he had ever loved.

He slowly made his way back to the opera house after such a considerable absence, that people were leaving as he went up the stairs. At the top of the corridor, he was smilingly accosted by a fashionable lady, and her very pretty daughter, who bestowed many gay smiles and nice little speeches on her special admiration,—grave, handsome, distinguished-looking Sir Rupert Lynn.

Alas for him! At what an unpropitious moment to meet his late betrothed face to face! Had he been alone, who knows what might have occurred? But he was not alone. He was listening to, and flirting with an undeniably fast-looking, very *décolletée*, noisy girl. (He was only listening, but he was caught in the toils, and could not escape! Nothing less than a cry of fire, would have freed him.)

As Miss Browne, Lady Lesborough, and several attendant, and obsequious cavaliers came down the lobby, for one instant there was a little block at the top of the stairs, and he and Helen stood almost side by side.

Would she acknowledge him? He almost held his breath. Would she even look at him? Yes, with a cold, indifferent glance, as of that bestowed on an absolute stranger. Then this tall young queen of society, in a white and silver mantle, passed on down-stairs, followed by her train,—one carrying her bouquet, another her fan, a third, her opera-glasses.

"That's the new beauty, Miss Browne," announced his lively gaoler. "Very aristocratic-looking for a colonial, is she not? and worth her weight in nuggets."

CHAPTER XXVII

"HULLO! where on earth have you been?" inquired Sir Rupert's companion, suddenly appearing, and giving him a pretext to release himself at last. "What in the world became of you? You missed a treat, I can tell you!" Then suddenly struck by his friend's gravity, and pallor, he said, "You were not ill, were you? You look rather seedy."

"I felt the place a bit warm—and I just went outside to get a breath of fresh air."

"Well, you missed Melba's last solo! It was splendid; and you missed more than that. I went round to Lady Lesborough's box between the acts, and got introduced to the heiress. Ah, ha, my boy! and if you had been with me,—you would have been presented too!"

At this pleasant prospect, Sir Rupert could not refrain from an involuntary shudder.

"She's even handsomer than you'd think," proceeded his loquacious companion, lighting a cigar. "She stands looking into, which is more than you can say for a lot of girls—all so frightfully made up; but there's no deception about her, I can tell you! Such a skin—like alabaster! such a pair of eyes, such a pretty little mouth!"

Sir Rupert winced. It revolted him to the very depths of his soul, to hear this out-spoken, coarse-minded friend of his, appraising Helen's charms.

"By George! I think I'll enter for the stakes myself, eh? A clear course, and no favour, now the lover is

done for. I don't suppose she would ever look at him again? What do you say?"

His companion made no direct reply, but hailing a taxi said, as he put his hand on the door:

"Well, good night, Stratton, I suppose I can't drop you anywhere, can I?"

"Hullo, are you not going on to the club?" cried his friend, aghast.

"No, no!" impatiently. "Well, good night."

"What the deuce is up with the fellow?" said Mr. Stratton to himself, as he puffed angrily at his cigar, and walked along briskly in the direction of Pall Mall. "Can't make it out! Can't make head or tail of him!" removing his cheroot, and surveying it with indignant interrogation. "Bolts out of the theatre,—heat—all stuff! Looks as if he had seen a ghost! Someone in the house, of course—but who? Always a reserved chap,—close about his affairs! Heavens!" slapping his leg exultingly, "I have it! Yes, I have it, or my name's not Tom Stratton! *He* is the lover, by George! It was down near *his* place, she had a situation. It was after he saw her,—he was struck dumb! No wonder. Small blame to him! And she—she looked a little bit queer, too, now I come to think of it, when I mentioned, that I was with an old school-fellow—a Sir Rupert Lynn! Oh, I say! won't this be a fine story for Bob Sladen;" but after some reflection, it dawned upon Mr. Stratton that he had better keep his discovery to himself. Recollections forced themselves into his mind—recollections of other days, when Rupert Lynn, although a most loyal friend, and popular comrade, resented very decidedly, any idle interference with what he was pleased to consider, his private affairs.

No! For the present, he would keep his own counsel, and let events unfold themselves, without his assistance.

And what about Sir Rupert? His reflections were not of the pleasantest, as he divested himself of his dress-coat, got into a shooting-jacket, and throwing himself into an arm-chair, proceeded to light a cigar,—that universal soother of men's ruffled feelings, and prepared to face the situation.

To judge by Helen's demeanour—by her look of frozen indifference, of total lack of recognition, as far as he was concerned—there was "no appeal." Why, she did not even change colour, or betray that she had ever set eyes upon him before, by so much as the flickering of an eyelid! What marvellous self-possession! Who that knew her as he had done, would have believed that no marble statue could be colder or more composed, when occasion required! (He was not aware that she had seen him from her box,—that she had steeled herself, to the meeting, and had been well prepared for that accidental rencontre.) Would she ever forgive him? or had she banished him from her heart and thoughts? Should he write to her? Should he endeavour to obtain Katie's good offices on his behalf? What should he do? For several days he could not come to any distinct conclusion. It drove him nearly frantic to hear other men discussing "the Fair Helen," as they called her; to listen to their weighing the pros and cons; the chances for, and against, this, and that rival suitor; to hear them laughing and chaffing, these supposed aspirants, before his very face; it was simply maddening! No wonder fellows at his club began to say among themselves, that Lynn had a devil of a temper, and that he could be more sarcastic when he liked, than Rousby,—and *that* was saying a good deal! What the mischief had come over him? he used to be such a cheery Johnnie; it was not money; it was not a

woman—he never bothered his head about them! What was it?"

It was some satisfaction to Sir Rupert to know by hearsay, at any rate, that *his* place had not been filled as yet. The beauty was hard to please. She laughed at sentimental speeches—snubbed the too confident of her adoring circle; if he dared to think that it was on account of a dim lingering regard for him, how happy it would make him! But no! no! he could not lay *that* flattering unction to his soul. He was not so mad as that!

He had seen her several times since. Once in the Park, driving with an aristocratic old lady, and another girl. There had been a block among the carriages close to him, and their eyes had met—this time a faintly perceptible flood of pink, had dyed her cheeks; but her eyes gave no sign. She turned them away at once, and looked straight before her,—presenting nothing but a haughty, rigid little profile.

On another occasion he had seen her at a ball, besieged with partners, and he had held aloof, and afar off, with angry, bitter thoughts in his mind. Alas! who could he blame, but himself? He had to thank no one but himself, that he stood in the background—a stranger, instead of being, as he once was, the happy man to whom all her dances, her pretty looks, and gay smiles belonged. He met her once more at the Academy, escorted from picture to picture by Tavy Wandsworth,—gladly, oh! gladly would he wring Tavy's neck—and herself attracting as much notice, from the crowd of fashionables, as any painting there.

Tavy's chances had been spoken of with some favour; his mother was backing him,—and so was Lady Lesborough. Tavy was a young man who had a sincere appreciation of his own merits, and thought it by no

means beneath his deserts to be escorting one of the prettiest girls in London, and to be envied by all (male) beholders. Tavy was an excellent specimen of the *petit crevé* of Paris—the " Nut " of London, the modern Macaroni, or Blood. He loved the theatre, he delighted in dress. He liked champagne suppers, he liked the society of boys and girls—especially girls—he liked his liberty—but his debts were pressing—he would not mind renouncing his freedom, in favour of Miss Brown. Yes, there would be a certain kudos, in walking off with the heiress, just under the noses of half a dozen other fellows. With the Mater to back him,—he had a first class chance.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BLANCHE DESPARD had been a true prophet when, alluding to her cousin Helen, she declared to her mother that " Katie would bring her round." The " bringing round " had been a much more difficult, and delicate manœuvre than she anticipated; for Helen could never compel herself to think of her aunt and her eldest cousin, without feelings of intense repulsion. Nevertheless a truce was made, the hatchet was buried, and peace ultimately proclaimed.

Katie's lameness had been getting worse and worse, and she had been brought up to London to be placed under the care of a famous surgeon. After one of her visits to him, she went on to Lady Lesborough's, and had a long, confidential talk with her friend, in the back drawing-room in Lowndes Square. Helen was inexpressibly touched by her wan little face—sharp and pinched with wearying, and constant pain. She saw

a deplorable difference in her cousin since the days they rambled about the woods of Cardew, and she used to keep up with Lulu and herself, with ease using her stick with great effect. Now, although it had been changed for a crutch, she could hardly drag herself across a room.

"You will have to come and see *me*, Helen," she said, nodding her head emphatically.

"Dearest Katie, I could not! it would be impossible!" returned Helen, colouring warmly.

"And why is it impossible? Of course it is because of mother and Blanche. But you will have to make up, and forgive them, sooner or later. You see we really *are* your own relations,—though no one would have imagined it to be the case, judging from the warm reception we gave you!" she concluded, with a bitter little laugh.

"I think friends, do as well as relatives, if not better," said Helen, "and you were always my friend; and always will be!"

"And you will have to come and see me, for I can't come and visit you any more," returned Katie with decision.

"Not any more! and why not?" cried her cousin in dismay.

"Because Dr. White thinks that nothing will do me any good, until I have had a complete rest. I am to 'lie up,' as he calls it, and not move for the next three months. Fancy three months in bed—with my leg in a kind of iron cage!"

"Poor Kitty, how dreadful for you!"

"Yes—it is not a pleasant prospect, is it?" shrugging her shoulders. "And this is positively my last appearance, so I came to tell you all about it, and beg you—yes, you, dearest Helen—for my sake, to try and

let bygones be bygones, with the Mater and Blanche. I know I am asking an enormous favour,—and it is more than half, pure selfishness on my part; but think of me lying up there in that horrible back bedroom for the next three months, hardly seeing a soul, with little to do but study the pattern of the paper on the wall; for I am not to use my arms, not to write, not to work; and imagine what a boon your visits would be, dear Helen!—I may not be with you long," laying her hand on her arm, and looking into her face with wistful eyes.

"Nonsense, Kitty! you must not say such things," said her companion impetuously, "I won't listen to you; but as you seem to wish it so very much, and for your sake *only*, remember, I will try and bring myself to meet your mother, but with this understanding, that we meet for the first time *now*, as absolute strangers. There never was such a person as Helen Browne, the governess.—I insist on this being thoroughly understood."

"I am sure it is awfully good of you, Helen; and you may be certain that mother and Blanche will be only too delighted to fall in with *that* view of the case; —it will not be nearly so awkward for them."

"Then we will make a new departure," continued Helen, rising and pacing the room. "Your mother can come here and see her niece, the rich heiress, who has arrived in this country with her relations the MacGregors, and we will have no unpleasant allusions to a former acquaintance. I leave the entire matter in your hands; it is your affair. I am forcing myself to a forgiving frame of mind entirely for your sake."

It will hardly be necessary to add, that Mrs. Despard eagerly clutched at the olive branch extended by her

rich niece, and lost no time in making a formal call—in the character of an affectionate and unabashed aunt.

On the safe and happy topic of Helen's late father, Mrs. Despard held forth with sisterly eloquence. To listen to her *now*, he was dearer to her than any brother had ever been to sister since the creation of the world; and all her devotion for him, she was ready to transfer at a moment's notice, to his daughter,—her dear niece.

Miss Blanche contented herself with maintaining a smiling, sympathetic silence; her active little brain was already weaving many schemes on behalf of her lovely cousin. In the first place, Blanche intended to eat a certain quantity of that very unappetizing morsel "humble pie," then she would take her newly-found relative to her bosom, and adopt her as her dearest, most confidential, and cherished friend. This attitude would naturally be mutual—for Helen seemed an impulsive, simple-minded girl, easily amused, easily angered, easily appeased, and very backward in knowing the ways of the world. She, Blanche, would gain her entire confidence, find out her feelings with regard to Rupert, and strain every nerve to keep them apart; the armistice, much less treaty of peace, must on no account extend to *him*.

These are a few of the ideas, that were passing through Miss Despard's mind, as she sat in Lady Lesborough's drawing-room, occasionally glancing at her mother and cousin, and drawing an elaborate pattern on the carpet, with the tip of her parasol; and to a certain extent she was enabled to carry out her schemes.

Helen was a constant visitor in Cadogan Square. Her visits were intended for Katie, to whom she brought quantities of the most lovely flowers, fruits, all the new

papers, magazines and books; but naturally she encountered other members of the family, and was drawn into teas, dinners,—and even drives!

Sir Rupert's face of unqualified amazement the first day he beheld Miss Browne occupying a seat in the Despard laudau, was beyond description. He could hardly trust his eyes as he saw Helen and her aunt rapidly rolling down Bond Street, evidently engaged in the most friendly conversation.

He was standing in a shop door, unseen by both. What did it mean? If she had forgiven her relatives, would she not also pardon him?

The very idea sent a glow through his veins, and he walked off rapidly to Cadogan Square, in the hopes of finding Blanche at home, and sounding her on the subject.

"Yes, Miss Despard was in the drawing-room," the servant informed him, and in another moment, he and the perfidious Blanche were face to face.

"Come to have tea with me, Rupert? How nice of you," she cried, extending both hands. "Simmons," —turning to the footman—"tea!"

That was not precisely the object of her cousin's visit, but he was unprepared to dispute the question, and gracefully accepted the situation.

They talked round to the subject, that both knew must ere long, come on the tapis; for some time they discoursed of the theatres—French plays, and the opera—criticized costumes at a recent fancy ball, and "cut up" a new book.

At length Sir Rupert broke the ice by saying:

"Your mother is not at home, is she?"

"No. In fact," pausing, cream jug in hand, "she has gone to a horticultural fête with Helen."

"Indeed!" replied her cousin, still stirring his tea

slowly, and without raising his eyes. "Then you have all made it up?—Have you?"

"Yes—entirely, we are now the best of friends."

"How very pleasant for you. I wonder if—if—Miss Browne intends to extend her forgiveness any further!"

"It was all her own fault from first to last!" returned Blanche, totally ignoring his broad hint. "What business had she to come to us under false pretences—trying to take us unawares—masquerading as a governess? exchanging her identity with a stranger; what madness!"

"She did succeed in taking you unawares, with a vengeance!" said Sir Rupert, looking full into his companion's eyes.

"Yes," colouring slightly, "she certainly did, and you too! She will never forgive you!" she added triumphantly.

"And pray why not? Why should I be more under the ban than others?" he asked quickly.

"Oh!" airily waving her hand; "you see we are her cousins—her nearest relations, except the MacGregors, who will be going back to Australia. She could not go on keeping up a feud with *us*; and she is so fond of Katie! But you——?" and she paused.

"Yes, and I?" he asked with a touch of defiance in his tone.

"A woman can forgive her own sex sooner than she can a man, especially a lover, who casts her off, and disowns her!"

Sir Rupert winced.

"She is terribly proud, and was delighted to have won the affections of a baronet under the guise of a pauper. She liked the idea of being loved for herself alone, and trusted in, to any extent, and it seems that

you shattered all these happy notions rather rudely!" concluded Blanche, with a smiling nod.

"It is quite true. The truth seemed too hard—too impossible to credit. It was not because she was a poor governess I cast her off, as you called it, for I had never known her to be otherwise. It was because I believed her to be another man's wife. Could you not help me to obtain a hearing, Blanche, to beg her forgiveness?" drawing his chair a little closer, and looking at her anxiously.

"No, it would be useless!" cried Blanche very sharply. "I know from what she has said from time to time, that all love or liking for you has entirely died away; that she never wishes to see you, or to speak to you again; that were you to humble yourself to the very dust, she would spurn you, as you spurned her! I am telling you the truth," added Blanche (who certainly lied courageously and well), raising her light steely eyes to those of the unhappy young man at the opposite side of the little tea-table.

There was not a blush on her cheek, not a quiver of an eyelash. She must be telling the truth, thought her companion, and he was the more inclined to believe her, when he mentally recalled Helen's cold, haughty, impassive appearance each time that they had met.

"I wish to spare your feelings as much as possible," proceeded Blanche affectionately,—who perceived with inward triumph, that her plan was working well.—"There is no need for you to humiliate yourself unnecessarily; and I may as well tell you in confidence, that it is all but settled that Helen is to marry Lord Wandsworth!"

"So I have heard," replied her cousin, at last forcing himself to speak; "but I never believed it. Tavy

Wandsworth is a needy, useless young fool, and not fit to wipe her shoes."

"Oh! not such a fool as he looks by any means," returned Blanche with engaging confidence. "He has a title, she has money. It is just what the chaperons call 'a most suitable match!'"

"It is nothing but vile exchange and barter, and maddening to think of," said Rupert angrily, rising and searching for his gloves and hat.

"Well, Rue," said his cousin, standing up to say good-bye, and holding out her hand, "I am sorry for you—very—but it will be all the same a hundred years hence! Console yourself with that reflection."

"Not much consolation in that," he answered; "but all the same I'll try and see her, and speak to her again. Yes! I will, Blanche. I can't let my whole life go by the board without one struggle. It may be no use, very likely I shall fail; but you know the lines:

"'He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who fears to put it to the touch,
To win—or lose it all!'"

"The idiot!" cried Blanche, with a stamp of her foot, as the door closed on her cousin. "Idiot, idiot! However, he won't be warned, and must take the consequences, and I shall make them exceedingly unpleasant. Yes, I shall!" addressing a fat pug that lay coiled up in a low armchair. "I shall work upon her feelings, and if she does not mount the high horse, and give him his congé, my name is not Blanche Despard!"

Sir Rupert was unshaken in his resolve to see, and speak with his late fiancée—although he had small hopes of success. He saw her the day after his visit to Cadogan Square walking in the Row with Lord

Wandsworth, whilst Lady Lesborough and another lady, complacently brought up the rear. Tavy Wandsworth was got up with enormous care, in a creaseless morning suit, patent shoes and silk socks, and was bending down to the white parasol beside him, with an air of intimate friendliness, that made Sir Rupert's heart burn like fire within him; for the pretty white parasol seemed to laugh, and to heed, and to listen with apparent interest to empty-headed Tavy's small confidences, and compliments.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT seemed the very irony of fate, that their deadly enemy—(had they but known it)—was the sole possible link between Helen and Rupert. An enemy to Helen, with a hatred born of envy, and the feeling one woman naturally entertains towards another, who has robbed her of her lover! An enemy to Rupert, in that she was resolved to stand between him, and the fulfilment of his dearest hopes; and as far as he was personally concerned, her bosom was torn between two devouring passions,—love, and hatred.

Had Katie been as formerly, she would have been a ready, and gracious "go-between," confidante, an invaluable peace-maker, and readily healed the rift separating her cousins; but Katie was lost to all social life and interests, and spent her days and nights in an agony of racking pain.

Rupert had cast his thoughts to Lulu,—but at once abandoned the idea as preposterous. How could he bring himself to pour his joys and sorrows into the ear of that volatile, and mischievous monkey? Mrs.

Despard would be sternly unsympathetic, and he was not acquainted with Lady Lesborough, or the MacGregors. There was no one for him to turn to except Blanche,—and with what a discouraging result, we have just seen!

Helen, on her part, was only too ready to bury the past, and accord her free forgiveness to her late betrothed; weighing everything in her mind, softened now by the ease of her surroundings, she was prepared to make just allowance for his want of faith. At first, she had hardened herself,—and her views on the subject of his complete submission were on a very large scale; but as day after day went by, and still he held aloof, and showed no symptoms of penitence nor any desire to return to his former allegiance, her heart died within her. She would now be satisfied with a very moderate amount of humiliation, and was perfectly ready—nay, eager, to meet him half way; but surely he could not expect the first advances to come from *her?* Vainly had she struggled to forget him, to live in a whirl of abstracting gaieties, to give herself no time for thought, and to endeavour to feel an interest in the existence of other men. It was quite useless; the mere fact of catching a sudden glimpse of him in the Row—of seeing the back of his head in a theatre—increased her colour in a very perceptible degree.

"There was no one like Rupert," she declared to herself. Not one among the admirers of her present palmy days, was half so pleasing to her eyes, and mind, as the lover who had cast her off with contumely, and contempt.

The breach between them, seemed daily widening; his name was never mentioned in his aunt's house, his friends, were apparently not her friends. Perhaps he was too overwhelmed with regret and confusion to

venture to approach her—thus whispered hope, who ever told a flattering tale! Perhaps as Mahomed was not inclined to come to the mountain, the mountain had better exert herself? and with this idea fresh in her mind, she suddenly opened the subject to Blanche, —now the most affectionate and sympathetic of cousins. Blanche was spending the afternoon with her, and engaged in the congenial task of turning over and criticizing the latest additions to Helen's wardrobe. Two or three lovely gowns lay on the bed and were undergoing a searching inspection, whilst their owner sat in a low chair at an open window, looking out ostensibly at some Italian singers, but in reality, making up her mind to speak on the all-absorbing topic, and striving to bring her courage to the sticking-point.

"I must say Madame Panier has a wonderfully good cut!" said Blanche. "I don't know anyone that puts in a sleeve as well as she does! How much did she charge you for this blue dress, Helen?"

"Oh!" returned Helen dreamily, "the blue one, I am not quite sure; it was not very outrageous, I know. By the way, Blanche," avoiding her cousin's all-searching grey eyes, "do you ever see anything of your cousin Rupert now?"

"Rupert!" echoed Blanche in a key of animated surprise. "Oh, yes, I see him often! But why do you ask?" she concluded with emphasis.

Merely because we were such friends once, and—and, I thought perhaps he would have liked to renew our acquaintance now that I am established as a sort of connection—a cousin's cousin," she rejoined, with a miserable attempt at mirth.

"So you are!" cried Blanche, sitting down on an ottoman, and making up her mind to disabuse her companion's mind, of any lingering *tendresse* in the

direction of the gentleman in question. "I daresay it seems odd, that you have never met, but I believe I know the reason that Rupert avoids you so persistently!"

"Avoids me!" repeated Helen with rising colour.

"Yes, dear! To be quite frank with you, he flies from you like the plague! He feels that he, like all of us, behaved miserably! It does not bear to be spoken about—" and indeed it *did* not; "and to tell you the truth, though you would never have guessed it, Rupert is a little tiny bit narrow-minded, and cannot endure to feel *small*. Every time he sees you, you remind him of an unpleasant event in the past, an event which he is trying to forget as fast as ever he can, in the society of Lady Ann Ring!"

"And *who* is Lady Ann Ring?" asked Helen in a low voice, and with averted eyes.

"She is a girl that is rather fast, and not a bit what you would call his style; but she has lots of money; and not at all averse to being Lady Lynn! Rupert paid her no end of attention last season. Then came his little interlude with *you*; and now he is making the running again at such a pace, that there will be a wedding at St. George's before we know where we are!"

"Really!" said Helen, making a valiant attempt to steady her voice; "I don't think I know Lady Ann's appearance. What is she like?"

"Oh, she *thinks* she is a beauty. She is always well turned out, in advance of the fashion,—she wears shamefully low frocks, and has very bold dark eyes. You may have noticed her riding in the Park; she wears a grey habit, and rides a bright bay horse, with white stockings. She is outrageously noisy,—you can hear her laugh half-a-mile off!"

Yes, Helen recognized the young lady now by this

flattering description. She was the girl she had seen talking to Rupert in the lobby of the opera house; a girl with bare shoulders, and bold eyes. She had seen her more than once riding with him in the Row. She had even been introduced to her.

Jealousy and mistrust are fires that kindle easily when blown by the bellows of neglect, and lighted by the match of indignation!

Helen felt her pride come to her aid, as she drew up her long white throat, and turned to her cousin, who was leaning back with her head resting against the bottom of the bed, and watching with half-closed, malicious eyes, the effect of the missile she had launched. A *rival!*

"And when is the wedding to be?" inquired Helen with surprising composure.

"Oh! I really don't know that anything is positively fixed! I should not wonder if it was postponed till after Rupert's return. He talks of going on an expedition to South America—with his friend Captain Torrens—he has an interest in some horse ranch or mine."

"I suppose you will all be delighted, when he is married and settled down near you, for life!" remarked Helen, dealing an unintentional, but smarting wound in her turn.

"Yes!" replied Blanche, with a swift, suspicious glance; "it is really time for him to give up wandering about the world; especially now that he is tolerably well off, and can afford to inhabit his ancestral halls. It is a sin to see Cardew shut up. I daresay if you particularly wished it, and made a point of it, he would come and pay you a visit," she added slowly. "Shall I sound him?"

"On no account!" cried Helen, springing to her feet. That Blanche should offer in this patronizing

manner, to bring her recreant lover reluctantly into her presence, was an idea that was more galling than words could describe!

"Why not? He can only say *no!*" continued Miss Despard encouragingly.

"For many reasons!" returned Helen, who was leaning against the window looking out, and seeing nothing,—with hot anger in her heart, and a choking sensation in her throat. "*One* will be sufficient, I daresay; and that is——"

"Yes, and that is?" echoed Blanche eagerly.

"That"—turning slowly round, and confronting her companion—"that I should decline to see him!"

"Oh! really!" opening her orbs in wide-eyed surprise; "I thought from your manner at first, that you seemed anxious to kiss and be friends!" rising, and walking over to the glass, and rearranging her hair with little complacent pats of her jewelled fingers.

"Then you thought wrong!" said Helen, ungrammatically, and moving towards the door, she added:

"Now I am sure it is tea-time, and I am dying for a cup of tea. Come downstairs. I have no doubt that Lady Lesborough thinks by this time we must have settled all the affairs of the nation!"

They had settled a good deal,—had Helen but known.

That evening Miss Despard sent a delicate note on thick grey paper, and written in a broad black hand, to Sir Rupert's club:

Looking over his shoulder, we read it, too, and this is what we see:

"DEAR RUPERT,

"I had a conversation with Helen to-day, and brought you on the tapis, in the most diplomatic

manner; but all my good offices were of no avail. She will never forgive you, and said that were you to call on her at any time, she would decline to see you; so I have spared you the humiliation of the snub direct! Come and dine with us to-morrow night, and talk over the whole affair, with your affectionate cousin,

"BLANCHE."

CHAPTER XXX

IT may be inconceivable to some, that any girl could be so treacherous as Blanche Despard; but we all know that "the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked;" and Miss Blanche, in addition to a naturally oblique, hard, cruel, disposition, had what she considered, wrongs of her own to avenge!

She had loved her cousin Rupert, as much as it was in her power to care for anyone; and before Helen Browne had come between them, he had certainly seemed to derive a certain amount of pleasure from her society.

Yet in her heart of hearts, she could not conceal from herself, that he cared for her only in a cousinly way; but she had cherished sanguine hopes, of increasing his liking to a warmer, and tenderer temperature.

Very delightful were their strolls about the garden, their afternoon rides, their games of tennis. His notes and letters from abroad, were models of their kind—friendly, confidential, amusing, and full of good-humoured sketches of John Bull, and Uncle Sam.

Delightful, too, were the little gifts that he never failed to bring in his hand; and more delightful than

all, was it to see him return again and again from his wanderings, entirely and unmistakably heart-whole!

Some people's pride is easily aroused, and she had succeeded with the assistance of her warm imagination, and untrammelled tongue, beyond her fondest expectations in erecting a barrier between Rupert and Miss Browne, that parted them as effectually as if the whole world divided them.

Opportunities arose now of meeting each other; but neither of them chose to avail themselves of the occasion.

One morning, Lady Lesborough, the MacGregors and Helen were seated at the breakfast table, discussing their engagements for the day—the entertainment of the previous evening—and opening various brilliantly monogrammed notes. Angus MacGregor was a canny Scot, and it was pleasanter and cheaper, to go shares with his cousin, and indeed to bear all expenses, than live with his large party in a fashionable hotel. Mr. MacGregor was buried in the morning paper, above which the top of his bald head was just visible—though he occasionally appeared from behind it to swallow some coffee, or a mouthful of cold raised pie.

"Does Sir Rupert Lynn live down near the Despards?" he suddenly asked, lowering his paper, and looking towards Helen.

"Yes," she answered, with a sudden suffusion of colour. "His place is within two miles!"

"Then you must have known him," continued her uncle sharply. "You know him then—eh?" he reiterated, by no means blind to his young friend's sudden confusion.

"Yes, I knew him—once!" she returned significantly.

"And you cut him now! Ah!—well, I suppose he was mixed up in that business—eh, lassie?"

A faint assent was his only reply.

"Well, whatever grudge you may have against him, he is certainly a fine fellow. Just listen to this!" clearing his throat, and giving his spectacles an impressive hitch.

"Last night between twelve and one o'clock, a fire broke out in a house in Albany Street. It appears that it had been smouldering for a considerable time, and that, when the flames burst out, they made such headway, that the whole upper part of the house and stairs were in a blaze, before the fire engines could be summoned. Some of the inmates were rescued with the greatest difficulty. In one case, a man jumped from the third floor into a sheet spread out to receive him, and informed the crowd that another lodger—a youth—who was confined to his bed with a broken leg, after making frantic endeavours to gain the stairs, had, by this time, succumbed to the flames. On hearing this one of the bystanders dashed into the house, scaled the fiery staircase, and shortly afterwards appeared at the open window with the boy in his arms. A roar of many voices greeted his appearance, and the crowd surged to and fro with throbbing excitement, as they beheld the pair above them, standing out distinctly against a ruddy background, and heard the loud crash of the falling staircase.

"It was, indeed, a moment of intense suspense, till the fire-escape reached the third story. Seconds were of priceless moment, for the flames were spreading fast. There was a general gasp of relief, as the crowd beheld the adventurous stranger descending the ladder—a very difficult feat—with his helpless prize in his arms.

"They had barely reached terra firma, when the floor of the room they had just quitted, fell in with a sound of thunder; and the window, in which they had been standing sixty seconds previously, was simultaneously enveloped in sheets of flame.

"It appears that the fire originated in the upsetting of a kerosene lamp in one of the bedrooms, and that the conflagration had extended to the very curtains of the bed, before its horrified occupant had realized the catastrophe.

"The dense mass of people who were assembled in the street, received the lame boy and his deliverer with extraordinary enthusiasm. The former was wholly unscathed; but the gentleman who had risked his life on his behalf had his clothes and his hair scorched, and his left arm very badly burnt. Evidently he is one of those who do good deeds, and blush to find them fame, for he declined to give his name or address. And having made over his charge to the care of a relative, vanished in the crowd.

"We have since learned that the name of this gallant young gentleman is Sir Rupert Lynn, of Cardew, Moonshire, formerly an officer in the Black Hussars."

"Now that is the sort of thing that stirs my old blood!" said Mr. MacGregor, laying down his paper. "I should like to know that young fellow. I think Stratton is a friend of his, and I'll get an introduction through him, and ask him to dinner. Eh! what do you say, Helen,—or has he offended you past forgiveness?"

"Of course you can ask him if you please," replied Helen quietly; "but I think you will find that he will not avail himself of your invitation.—He is not more anxious to meet me,—than I am to meet him!"

"It's not a lovers' quarrel, is it?" asked Mr. MacGregor, brusquely.

"My dear Angus! What are you thinking of?" cried his wife, aghast. "These are pretty manners! Don't mind him, Helen, it is no business of his; don't answer any of his questions. It is no affair of his when, how, or where, you quarrelled with this young baronet,—who has taken such a hold on his fancy."

"I shall certainly take your advice," said Helen, rising to leave the room, with an ill-assumed air of gaiety. "I cannot possibly make you my father confessor, uncle,—you could hardly expect that!"

When the door had closed on Helen and her cousins, he cleared his throat, rubbed his spectacles, put them slowly on, and looked gradually through them at his wife and his kinswoman, and said very impressively:

"I'll tell you what it is: Helen and that young fellow have had some love-passages between them. Believe me, I can see as far into a milestone as most! Her face was the colour of the rising sun, the moment his name was mentioned! Shall I ask him to dinner—eh? Help a lame dog over the stile?"

"No, no! on no account!" protested Mrs. MacGregor. "Fancy an old man like you, meddling in young people's love affairs! Just leave them to themselves! If they really care for one another, they will make it up; and if not, it is better, to just let them drift quietly apart."

CHAPTER XXXI

BUT in spite of Blanche's manœuvres, in spite of their own disinclination, it was ordered by fate (who often takes these matters in hand) that Sir Rupert and Helen were to meet—and to speak to one another face to face.

It came about in this way. Lady Frances de Lacy, —one of the smartest and most popular leaders of society,—was giving a grand afternoon entertainment at her villa on the Thames. The season was waning; it was the middle of July, and positively "the last appearance for this season," of many fashionables, who were on the eve of taking wing for the moors or the Continent, and had just come down to "show themselves" at Lady Frances's fête.

The lawns and slopes were scattered over with a brilliant, well-dressed crowd. Refreshments were served in the villa; though trays of tempting ices and strawberries, were carried about the lawns by six full-sized footmen, with powdered hair. The Hungarian band was discoursing sweet music, and all was going as merry as a marriage-bell.

Under the shade of a magnificent lime tree, Helen Browne was seated in a low wicker chair, slowly drawing a pattern on the grass with her white sunshade, and responding to the soft nothings, that a young man who sat slightly behind her, was pouring into her ear, with a languid—nay, a discouraging indifference.

"The beautiful Miss Browne" was the cynosure of many eyes; one of the sights, and one of the objects for critical remark on that warm, sleepy July afternoon.

She really received every encouragement to rank herself as a beauty ; but she shrank with dismay from the flattering prospect. No, no ; it gave her no pleasure to see many pairs of eyes turned upon her, with unconcealed curiosity,—or bold admiration. Nor did she feel a glow of honest pride, when she beheld her last new photo exhibited in a shop window, between a popular burlesque actress, and General Botha.

She despatched her uncle Angus to rescue it in hot haste –but it was gone ! The shopman declared that it had already been purchased by a tall, dark gentleman, who said he was sure that there was some mistake in its appearing in such a manner. He had bought all the copies, and, strange to say, had torn them into little pieces, and left them in the shop !

Mr. MacGregor hastened back to his niece, and told her this amazing tale, with much animation. He did not again fail to remark her rising colour, and her evident embarrassment.

" It was that fellow Lynn, I suppose ! " he observed to his wife, later, as he stood at the door of his dressing-room, adorning himself for a dinner-party ; and she subsequently heard him assuring his reflection in the glass, as he angrily struggled with a refractory white tie, " that *he* could see as far into a milestone as most people."

To return to Helen, after this long digression.

Helen, whom we left sitting under the lime tree, feeling rather bored, and looking supremely indifferent to her neighbours—who were eating cream ices, flirting, and telling little society anecdotes (good and bad), under the shade of the same wide-spreading tree. Suddenly she noticed her hostess approaching—a dainty figure in one of Reville's most novel combinations—and escorted by a gentleman to whom she was talking

volubly. His head was bent attentively towards the little lady tripping by his side; but when, within a few yards of the tree, he raised it, Helen beheld the handsome and familiar features of Rupert Lynn.

Little did Sir Rupert guess at the pitfall that was before him, when Lady Frances had smilingly received him, scolded him playfully for being such a late arrival, mentioned, that she wished to present him to a particular friend of hers, and begged him to accompany her without delay.

"Miss Browne," she said, in her clear, flute-like voice, apparently unobservant of the curiously strained look on her young friend's face, and her rapid fluctuations of colour, "do you know Sir Rupert Lynn?—Sir Rupert?" smiling at her companion, who looked as if he had been turned into stone, "allow me to present you to Miss Browne!"

Two icy bows were the result of this unexpected introduction.

"Come, Sir Rupert, do take Miss Browne to see my plant-house; and if you will allow me, my dear"—turning confidentially to Helen—"I will take your chair. I shall be glad of a little rest, for I have been standing the last two hours and feel completely done up!"

So Helen was remorselessly turned out; and she and her former lover, were obliged to make the best of the matter, and to accept the embarrassing situation thus thrust on them, with as good a grace as they could assume. Indeed Helen made a noble struggle for self-command, as she slowly rose, opened her parasol, and looked towards Sir Rupert with a cool little nod, as much as to say, "I am ready."

The eyes of several people were on her; people who seemed to know in some subtle way, that underneath

this outward calmness, this studied composure, there lay a hidden romance—nay, perhaps a tragedy, was concealed from their curious eyes!

"Yes; there was something unnatural in the way those two looked at each other," more than one clever, penetrating lady spectator, had assured herself.

Soon they were slowly pacing the velvety lawn, Helen carrying her head unusually high.

Sir Rupert was pale. He tightened his lips under his moustache with an air of fierce resolve, and at last he spoke:

"Do we meet as strangers, Miss Browne? or may I presume that we have known each other before?"

"As strangers—thank you, Sir Rupert. It will be as well to forget our last encounter,—when you were good enough to offer me your charity," replied his companion, in a chilly tone.

"Yes, no doubt I have sinned past forgiveness. I know that I have no right to your leniency," he returned in a low voice, "but even to meet again as strangers, is better than nothing; if you will give me another chance—a fresh start, and let me make amends for the past in some way!"

"Past!" echoed Helen; "*we* have no past, I thought we had agreed to bury it out of sight? Pray do not forget that I am a stranger whom you have never heard of, nor met, until to-day. How could we possibly have a past in common?" raising her pretty brows with a smile of interrogation.

Her companion was prevented from making any immediate answer; for at this instant he was accosted by a sprightly lady wearing a costume of the latest fashion and a most remarkable hat—a very burlesque of a hat, who, approaching him with outstretched hands, exclaimed in a high, shrill voice:

"Then you are not engaged to Lord Wandsworth?" asked her companion eagerly.

"No, I am not,—but I really do think, Sir Rupert, —that for a complete *stranger*, you ask singularly odd questions!"

"That's true—I beg your pardon!" he replied humbly, and for some moments they paced the lawn in silence.

They seemed entirely to have forgotten the plant-house—seemed oblivious of their surroundings, and indifferent as to where their steps tended.

They were naturally surprised, when they found themselves alone in a deliciously cool, shady walk, where the branching trees overhead stretched out their green garments, and kept out the sun. The band and the buzz of hundreds of tongues sounded afar off, as the couple strolled along side by side, in this sequestered spot.

"I read an account of your exploit in the papers," began Helen abruptly.—It was not necessary to add that she nearly knew it off by heart—that the paragraph had been carefully cut out, and reposed among the most sacred treasures in her desk at home "I must congratulate you, on your courage, and your marvellous escape."

"Oh!" colouring with pleasure; "as to the courage, that was nothing. Any other fellow would have done the same."

"And why did they not?" interrupted Helen. "By all accounts there were thousands in the street. But you were the only one of them all,—who was ready to risk your life!"

"Ah, well! I daresay lots of them had wives and families; and I was pretty near the door. You must not think too much of what I did. Surely no one

would stand by and see a helpless boy burned in his bed, without trying to lend a hand ? "

" You were scorched and burnt, were you not ? "

" Oh, nothing to speak of —just a little singe on the arm, I got going upstairs."

" How did you get upstairs ? Were they not on fire ? "

" Yes, the banisters, and some of the carpeting was in a blaze ; but I need not tell you, that I did not loiter ; they fell in about two minutes after. It was an old house,—and burnt like tissue paper. I would not have believed, that fire would spread in such a way, if I had not seen it. It devoured everything before it—it was like a furnace."

" It must have been awful ; what danger you were in. I cannot bear to think of it," said Helen impetuously.

" Can you not ? " looking at her keenly. " I must say, Miss Browne, that it is awfully good of you to take such an interest in a—complete stranger."

Helen coloured to the very eyes, and a hasty answer was on the tip of her tongue ; but ere it had found words, he paused in the pathway, and said, " Forgive me ! I had no right to say that.—I would have gone into the fire ten times to hear what you said just now ; it makes me hope, that, perhaps in spite of all, you will forgive me *yet !* "

" Why should you set such store by my forgiveness," inquired Helen, with trembling lips, and her eyes on the ground. " Why should you talk such nonsense, when you know you have never even thought it worth while to ask me to let bygones be bygones ? nor shown any wish to renew our—our—acquaintance ? "

" Call it that if you like ; it will do as well as anything else," he answered ; " but the reason I have not been to see you, nor written to you,—nor spoken, is simply this,

that I feared that I had offended you past all forgiveness —that the very sight of me, must have recalled hateful recollections; that you would think me a mean-spirited craven, who deserted and disowned, and disbelieved you, in your days of trouble; and would gladly come and be friends, once you had come out into the sun of prosperity! You may forgive me,—but it is more than I dare to hope; but one thing is positively certain, I shall never forgive myself. Helen, I am going abroad to-morrow; I must be away for months. You don't know how different I should feel going away if——"

"Helen!" cried a voice, in a high key of amazement; and, in another second, Miss Blanche Despard appeared from a side-walk standing directly before them; disgusted incredulity written in plain letters over every feature of her pale, little spiteful face.

"Helen, I have been looking for you everywhere! Lady Frances wants you at once,—to *sing*; and, Rupert, mother wishes to speak to you most particularly. She is sitting on one of the green seats at the end of this walk. It was she who told me where to find you. Do come along, Helen, they are waiting for you."

So saying, Miss Despard promptly carried off her cousin, and left Sir Rupert standing in the middle of the path alone, cursing his unlucky fate, and muttering anathemas under his dark moustache.

It is needless to say, that his aunt's anxiety for an interview was merely a ruse to detach him from his too dangerous companion.

After a few commonplaces had been exchanged between him and his elderly relative, he shook himself, so to speak, free, and made his way resolutely into the house, and edged, steered, and manœuvred a passage into the music-room; but everybody, like himself, seemed eager "to hear Miss Browne sing."

She sang " My dearest heart," and there was a thrill of subdued emotion in her notes, that reached the soul of the most careless listener.

In such a case, it can be readily imagined how it found an echo in the heart of Sir Rupert, who, with folded arms, leant against a wall, his eyes fastened on the face of the fair performer.

As the last bars of the song died away, and she stooped forward to take up her gloves, their eyes met for one single instant—not in an inadvertent little " look across the crowd,"—met and exchanged a glance—a glance, that was far more to Helen than the loud thunder of applause, which, after a second's hushed silence, followed the conclusion of her song.

On her way to the carriage, Sir Rupert accosted her once more. It was only for a hasty, hurried moment; for Mrs. Despard was, as it were, driving her niece and daughter before her,—anxious to be among the first departures.

" You are staying in Cadogan Square," he said, " are you not ? "

" Yes, only just for two or three days, whilst the MacGregors have gone down to the country, to see some old friends."

" Then "—lowering his voice—" may I write to you ? " (low as he spoke, his whisper was audible to Blanche's sharp ears)—" and if I do, will you send me a line ; even *one* word, to speed me on my journey with a lighter heart ? "

" Here is the carriage. Come along, girls," said Mrs. Despard impatiently ; " I suppose we shall hardly see you again, Rupert ? Get in, Blanche—get in, Helen," she urged impatiently.

There was no time for further conversation—nor for any other answer than Helen implied, by giving

Sir Rupert her hand—her hand and a smile. In another second, the fretting bays had plunged away from the porch, and the lovers were parted. Ah! they little guessed for how long.

CHAPTER XXXII

ALL the way home Helen was thinking of her promised letter! What would be the burden of it? What would he say?

The meeting with her ci-devant lover that afternoon, had aroused all her latent feelings—her love for him had stepped to the front, and thrust pride, indignation, and jealousy, entirely out of sight.

What was there about him so different to other men? Why did her heart beat tumultuously at the sound of his voice; her colour come, and go beneath his gaze?

He was sorry, terribly sorry, that he had misjudged her. Yes, she could see it in his face. He loved her as well as ever, of that she was certain. He would return to her from South America—return, and all would be well with them yet!

Yes, but she never reckoned on her evil genius, who was sitting opposite to her on the back seat of the carriage, her hands tightly locked in her lap, her eyes closed in feigned fatigue, her face set and rigid—her evil genius, who was busily spinning plan after plan of dire purpose in the recesses of her calculating, cruel, mind.

Helen was anxious to be alone with her thoughts. It was dreadfully uphill work talking to her aunt, and sustaining a fair share of conversation, when her

mind was full of a totally different subject than the various smart frocks, which had been displayed on Lady Frances's lawn.

It was half-past seven, when they reached home, and Helen hastened up to her room, threw off her hat, and sat down in the window, to look her new-found happiness squarely in the face! The letter would come by the early post next morning. Yes, of that she was confident. The post came round at half-past seven. In twelve hours, she would hold it in her hands; but how was she to send the answer? for answer, it must have.

Dinner was postponed till half-past eight, and for a whole hour Helen sat in the twilight, dreaming day-dreams, and building many fair castles in the air. Castles in the air, indeed! Already her cousin (the wicked fairy) had reduced her fair building to the dust.

Blanche knew Rupert's ways from long experience. She knew that if he wrote, he would send his missive by *hand*; so all dinner time, her ears were strained, her mind on the *qui vive* to hear the hall-door bell, dreading it unspeakably -dreading to see the fatal letter appearing on a salver; but it did not come. The meal was safely tided over, and Helen little knew, that with the conclusion of the repast, her hopes were also ended! It had been a mere question of moments, —a matter of ten minutes' delay; and yet that little ten minutes was the cause of a heavy heart, and of many bitter, unavailing tears.

Sir Rupert had hurried back to town, intending to write and despatch his letter at once, but on the way, he was accosted by a friend who detained him for fully ten minutes to listen to a club grievance —a fatal delay.

Soon after the ladies had left the dining-room, there came a smart pull at the bell, and Blanche, who had been lingering about the stairs, received a note in a square grey envelope, addressed in a well-known hand-writing to Miss Browne; "the messenger was to wait for an answer," said the footman, as he handed the salver to Miss Despard.

"Very well; I will give it to Miss Browne, and let you know if there is any reply," she returned, ascending the stairs, and going into the drawing-room,—for appearances' sake.

She glanced with a half-guilty look at Helen, whose head was bent low over some knitting near a shady reading lamp. How pretty she looked! even Blanche confessed to herself! and how little she knew what Blanche had in her pocket! After allowing a reasonable delay of about twenty minutes, Miss Despard again descended to the library, rang the bell, and desired the footman, to tell Sir Rupert's messenger "that Miss Browne had received the note,—and that there was no answer."

Poor Helen could hardly sleep all night, for thinking of the happiness that was to come to her the next morning; and early—as early as the first milk-cart—she rose, and wrapping herself in a dressing-gown, sat down at her window to watch for the post.

How long it appeared—how very, *very* long—before his well-known blue and red uniform came into view, and his loud rat-tat was heard across the street. "One door, two doors,—now the corner house," said Helen to herself with feverish excitement; "now he is coming here." Yes, he was crossing the road, sorting a packet in his hand.

"Rat-tat!" How her heart jumped. Her letter had arrived, of course, but how was she to get it?

She could not, would not, wait a whole hour till breakfast time; she would ring for Valerie, her maid. Yes, happy thought, hurrying to the bell.

Valerie was amazed to see her young mistress up, and about so early—standing in the middle of the room with rosy cheeks, and sparkling eyes, and all eagerness for the morning letters. Valerie descended sedately, and sedately returned, bearing in her hand three epistles. One glance was enough! None of them was *the* letter, and Helen's hopes fell to zero; she felt almost ready to burst into tears, as she turned over with trembling fingers, a receipt from a bookseller, a note from her aunt MacGregor, and the programme of a concert for charitable purposes. She felt as if life was too hard to bear this sunny July morning, but "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," and by the time she had sipped a cup of tea, she had begun to turn her thoughts with fond expectation towards the eleven o'clock delivery. Stimulated by this hope, and by the positive conviction that her letter *must* come then, she struggled to dress, and to take an interest in her appearance.

Deluded girl! your letter is lying inside the flap of Blanche's despatch case, and Blanche,who is not troubled with such a thing as a conscience,—is still reposing comfortably among her pillows.

It is hardly necessary to dwell on Helen's disappointment, as the eleven o'clock post brought her nothing, but some invitations, and notes from girl friends. Yet hope is hard to quench, and inventing one excuse after another, she remained in-doors all day, believing that her letter had been delayed in some unaccountable manner, and that though late,—it would arrive yet!

Days followed one another drearily; long, blank, empty, days, and still no letter.

The *Chimborazo*, in which Sir Rupert had sailed had now been a fortnight at sea, and it was time for Helen to put away her dead hopes, and to give them decent interment.

Blanche had witnessed the struggle, the anguish in her cousin's mind, had seen with inward triumph her spasmodic attempts at cheerfulness, her eager eyes when letters were delivered, her face of white, bitter disappointment; "so far, so good!" Rupert was out of the way for the next six months, and by the time he returned, Helen would be safely married. Yes, married to Tavy Wandsworth,—Helen could never make a stand against his overpowering mother, not to mention Tavy himself.

"You and Rupert seemed to make it up again, that day at Lady Frances'," she observed to Helen, not long after her cousin's departure. "I saw him chatting to you quite amiably,—but that was because his young lady wasn't there!"

"I don't believe he has any special 'young lady,' as you call it," replied Helen boldly.

"Oh! but he has, and if he denied it, you must not believe him. I have known a man who declared that he hardly knew a girl, and was actually married to her, within the week. Men hate people to know they are engaged,—they think it spoils their fun!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

SIR RUPERT had awaited an answer to his despatch, in no little anxiety, and had paced the room, sentry fashion, while his Mercury was away. His watch lay before him on the table, and he consulted it eagerly,

every five minutes; amazing to relate, his messenger was in his opinion not more than an hour late, when he heard his welcome ring.—We, who were behind the scenes, know, that the said retainer, had done his errand with all reasonable speed.

"But where is the letter?" demanded his master, gazing incredulously at his empty hands.

"There was no answer, Sir Rupert," replied the servant. "The footman took up the note, and after I waited for twenty minutes, or a quarter of an hour, he came to me, and said 'there was no answer.'"

Griggs was Sir Rupert's valet and factotum, he had accompanied his master everywhere, from Khartoum to Cardew, and *he* knew all about Sir Rupert's flirtation with the pretty governess.

Oh, yes, he'd eyes in his head! the governess was certainly a good-looking young woman, who had turned out to be an heiress. It was something like a fairy-tale, but Mrs. Despard's maid, declared that it was the "gospel truth."

Well! he, Griggs, had no objection to the match,—he was getting pretty well "fed up" with wandering about, and he considered it time that his master was settled. He was the more confirmed in this idea, by the fact of there being a very tidy little girl,—a game-keeper's daughter, at Cardew—who would make no opposition, if he asked her to be "Mrs. Griggs." So he had evidently a personal interest in getting his master married! He had felt instinctively that there was "something in the wind," by the way Sir Rupert had given him the note; and told him to be sure, and bring an answer!

"Then you didn't see Miss Browne?" said his master, who could hardly realize his disappointment.

"No, Sir Rupert! I only saw the butler and footman. I think she was up in the drawing-room,—for I could hear some fine singing!"

"*Singing*," here was a cruel piece of gratuitous information.

With a hasty gesture, Sir Rupert dismissed Mr. Griggs, and sat down to collect his scattered thoughts. Firstly, had Helen been revenging herself for the past? Had she feigned an interest, a mock forgiveness, in order the more cruelly to dash his hopes to the ground! What an actress she was! How well she had played the part of governess! How well she now fulfilled the part of the rich heiress and beauty! Nothing could be easier for her than to assume the rôle she had played that afternoon! She had worn an appearance of more than friendly interest, how she had blushed—and hesitated! Bah! it was all put on, it must have been. When she sent no reply to a letter,—a letter conveying the outpourings of his heart, his humble submission and entreaties; not even for an absolute pardon, but for just a line to carry away with him, to say "that when he returned, he might venture to number himself among her friends."

She sent no reply! Not even one word, but went to the piano and sang! Sang! doubtless a loud Pæan of triumph, a kind of "Io-triomphe," over her credulous, and miserable victim.

This was one view of the matter, and a very unpleasant one! And yet another presented itself before his mental vision.—Could Blanche the fair, have played him false? Could she have intercepted his note, for her own private ends? But no! He put the idea from him with indignation. He felt ashamed to think, that he could have dared to impute such an action to any woman,—worse still to his own cousin!

Then there was still another alternative,—which was the pleasantest, and for this reason, he dwelt on it the longest. Helen might have had no time to reply! Possibly the drawing-room was full of guests, and that would account for her singing. She would write the letter in her own room, and it would come to him by the early post.

It was strange, that both should build their expectations on this early post; and as a matter of fact,—they both suffered the same bitter disappointment.

The following afternoon, Sir Rupert was at sea, was steaming down the English Channel on board the *Chimborazo*. As the Cornish Coast sunk below the horizon, he was aware of an odd and painful pang of regret. Why was he deliberately putting the seas between himself and Helen? Already the salt water had worked a change in his feelings. Alas! too late, he now regretted, that he had not remained at home, braved the wrath of Torrens, cried off at the eleventh hour, and gone in person, to request a face to face interview with his former fiancée.

CHAPTER XXXIV

IT was a lovely autumn morning, when Sir Rupert and his friend steamed out of Southampton Water on board the *Chimborazo*. The *Chimborazo* was a favourite Liner, and carried a number of passengers—chiefly Spanish and American, also not a few Brazilian beauties, returning from sight-seeing in the Old World; but the ladies found Sir Rupert strangely cold and indifferent to the charms of the fair sex (an exceedingly handsome young man, who had

undeniable openings for making himself agreeable). His looks belied him ; he was taciturn, he was morose, he preferred spending hours in company with his own dark thoughts, and in smoking dozens of cigarettes, to endeavouring to beguile the sunny days in agreeable society. Captain Torrens, on the other hand, seemed only too glad to make the most of the golden opportunity. He talked, he told stories, he promenaded the deck, he played Quoits, he played Bridge, he sang and he flirted, and made himself very popular with more than one dark-eyed Señorita.

They touched at St. Thomas's, and a few days later, they were really approaching the warm shores of South America. The remaining hours were devoted to packing, making promises of meeting or writing ; paying the Steward's Bills, and discussing the merits and demerits of various rival Hotels.

The Harbour of Rio, is one of the largest and finest in the world, and looked its best, as the *Chimborazo* steamed slowly up the river in the white tropical moonlight. Soon they had cast anchor, and were besieged by a crowd of noisy boats, clamorous for passengers. Boats embarking dark swarthy men in white clothes, and wide Palmetto hats, who talked sonorous Spanish, and animated Portuguese, and who came to greet and welcome various Señors, and Señoras.

One of these gentlemen claimed Captain Torrens as an old friend,—for this was by no means Captain Torrens' first visit to the Brazils,—and when he and his companion had collected their baggage, he carried them off in triumph to his villa in the neighbourhood of Rio. He was Señor Carvalho, one of the working partners in the Donna Bianca Silver Mine, and hospitably insisted that at any rate for the present, Captain Torrens and his friend, should make themselves at home at Santa

Catherina,—the name of his very magnificent country house. The Señor's family consisted of his wife, two unmarried daughters, and one son. Sir Rupert, when he had got the throbbing of the engines out of his head, and enjoyed a good night's rest, could not refrain from endorsing Captain Torrens' encomiums, and admitting that they had fallen on their legs, and found an admirable billet! The cooking—of its kind,—was undeniable, their apartments combined coolness, with comfort, and the ladies of the house, were graciousness itself.

Santa Catherina, was a large green-shuttered, flat-roofed, white house, built round a colonnaded court-yard, or "Patio," in the good old Spanish fashion, and surrounded by fragrant groups of Orange trees, and Bananas in tubs. The lower part of the villa, was screened from public gaze, by broad latticed verandahs, over which masses of glossy-leafed creepers, with scarlet, white and purple passion flowers, tumbled in wild profusion.

Señor Carvalho and Captain Torrens had gone down to Rio on business. An hour ago they descended the steep white road, mounted on two handsome mustangs, and Sir Rupert was left behind.

As Señorita Mercédès and Señorita Inez, had promised that they would do their best to entertain him, he was in capable hands. They were both exceedingly handsome girls of the Spanish type, with black hair, indescribably graceful movements, and splendid dark eyes. Girls, who had been educated at a convent in Seville, and who spoke the most charming broken English. Even Sir Rupert was obliged to admit, that nothing could be prettier, than the picture on which his eyes were resting.

Señorita Mercédès was slowly swinging to and fro in

a grass hammock, which was slung between two pillars of the verandah,—it hung so low, that with the aid of a tiny satin-shod foot, she was able to keep moving, and fan herself, as the slender hammock swayed to and fro, with a kind of rhythm to her sister's guitar. Her sister, who was sitting in a low basket chair, was accompanying herself to a charming little Spanish ballad,—a ballad that went with a most haunting time and tune, and seemed to tell of the heart-hunger of some hapless Donna in distant Castile.

The two young Spanish Americans were not the least shy; they were prepared to ride, to dance, to sing, or flirt, with their father's foreign friends. The dark man was of a type unknown to these fair daughters of the South. He seemed preoccupied, and unresponsive; he failed to understand the language of the fan,—and more amazing still—the language of the eyes!

The girls had settled between them, that Don Ruperto had a love affair, there was some ice-hearted Inglesa in the background; this alone, would amply account for his reserve and self-command. He had been with them for ten days, had sung with them, danced with them, ridden with them. He was a magnificent horseman,—even their brother Carlos allowed that,—and had not once allowed himself to be inveigled into the mazes of a flirtation. He might make himself pleasant; they did not want to marry him! Madre de Dios! he was a heretic, and a foreigner,—but why was he so persistently silent, and grave, and glum.

Ah! Miss Blanche Despard could tell them the reason!

Five months later, Sir Rupert was riding once more through the streets of Rio; steering his horse amidst crowds of gaudily dressed negroes, clamouring fruit-sellers, and discontented half-breeds. You would

never recognize him, but take him for a Spanish Señor, with his bronzed face, black beard, Sombrero and Poncho. He was mounted on a magnificent black-brown horse, and conversing eagerly and cheerfully with his friend, Captain Torrens.

Captain Torrens has not borne the alteration so well. His beard is thin and irregular, and his light blue eyes, stand out with a comic expression, from his dark mahogany face. The pair, have had a most successful expedition, —business and pleasure have been happily combined; they have visited the mines; they have crossed treeless plains,—giving pasture to thousands of wild cattle,—they have been hospitably entertained at many a lonely Hacienda; they have traversed vast forests of rubber trees, and mahogany, and shot the implacable jaguar, the hideous alligator, the harmless humming-bird, and now, their labours o'er, are about to rest, and relate their adventures in the bosom of the family at Santa Catherina.

After five months roughing it, far from the haunts of civilization, Don Ruperto is unfeignedly pleased to meet his two pretty Spanish friends, and feels that on a former occasion, he was rudely and stupidly indifferent to their charms. Certainly they had nothing to complain of now. He seemed disposed to make amends for the past, and the girls agreed, that he was a most charming, and delightful cavalier.

Mercédès had an affianced lover, who looked coldly on the handsome Englishman, and had given her unmistakably to understand, that her enthusiasm must be cooled!

Inez had several declared and undeclared admirers, but partly to pique them, and partly to please herself, she no longer received their compliments and flowers, with gracious, and impartial favour! No! all her smiles

were given to the new arrival, and there was a good deal of sonorous swearing, and one or two very ugly threats, among the Señorita's circle of discarded admirers.

" Where is the Duenna, all this time ? " is a question that will naturally occur to most people. Señora Carvalho filled that post herself ; but she was easy-going, excessively indolent, and incredibly fat, and left her daughters a good deal to themselves.

" How could she be expected to climb the roof on moonlight nights, and gaze at the stars with Inez and Señor Ruperto ? Could a woman of her age and size, be asked to take the saddle, and accompany them for miles into the country ? Of course at dances, it was another affair,—there she could sit at her ease, and watch ! fan herself, and sip *dulcies*.

Her husband had a high idea of all Englishmen, he said they were to be trusted, and no one could look into the Señor Ruperto's dark eyes, and believe that he was anything but a mirror of chivalry.

There was a good deal of pleasant intimacy between the four young people, an intimacy fostered by star-gazing and guitar-playing. With regard to the latter Sir Rupert, thanks to Inez's instructions, was now quite an accomplished performer. He liked and admired this fair teacher immensely,—indeed once or twice he had asked himself, if liking was not too cold a term for his feelings ? She was lovely in her own style ; magnificent eyes, brilliant teeth,—what a walk ! and what a figure ! but he shuddered, when her mother's proportions came before his mental vision—and the Madré had been a surpassing beauty in her day.

Inez though very bewitching, and beautiful, was both shallow and ignorant. Her education did not extend beyond reading, writing, dancing and guitar-playing.

Inez resembled some gorgeous tropical flower, who would bloom and flourish in her own climate, but transplanted to cold England, how would it be with her? How would the half-educated, impulsive Brazilian, accustom herself to high-bred, highly polished, highly inquisitive, English dames? Then, she was a Roman Catholic. No! no, it would never do. Charming as were their rides, and their music lessons, he would be glad when Torrens had completed his business, and they could once more set their faces towards their native land.

And the fair Inez? Alas! she had been hoist with her own petard! She had intended the Señor Inglese to fall madly in love with her, and lo! the cases were reversed! She was distractedly in love with *him!* The bare idea of his leaving Rio, leaving Rio without her,—threw her into a frenzy of despair.

Sir Rupert endeavoured to blind himself to this change in his pretty friend; he assured himself that to a girl like Inez, flirtation was the very breath of her nostrils; that she really did not care a straw for him,—nor he for her. True, her eyes told a different tale, but that counted for nothing with a Brazilian beauty! Presently her eyes were supplemented by her tongue; and she became not only exacting, but jealous, and arbitrary. She could not endure him to speak to another woman—no; not even to her own sister!—to walk or dance with a girl, caused a stormy and tearful scene of remonstrance. Undoubtedly matters were becoming unpleasant for Sir Rupert Lynn. Although he had never declared himself in any way; nevertheless the Señorita appeared to consider him her exclusive property, and treated him as an accepted suitor! Her mother, the phlegmatic Señora, had been asking pointed questions, respecting his relations, his family, and his means? Surely she could not entertain the idea, that he wished

to carry her daughter across the seas, and introduce her to his people as Lady Lynn ?

Sir Rupert was, if anything, too sensitive, and too chivalrous. He could not bear to give pain to a woman, —he shrank from administering a rebuff, to his beautiful young hostess. What was the most delicate neutrality on his part, what was absolutely demanded by common politeness, the sanguine, and imaginative Inez, accepted for the reciprocation of her own feelings.

"Truly these Inglese were a cold-blooded race," she said to herself, "they could not love like the people under the line,—but by all accounts their love lasted *longer.*"

Affairs soon arrived at an acute crisis. Sir Rupert could not blind himself to the fact, that some sort of storm was brewing, after an interview he had with his fair friend, one sultry, tropical afternoon. They had been members of a riding expedition, to an old deserted Hacienda about ten miles from Rio. A merry, dainty meal had been discussed in the grass-grown garden, and at its conclusion, everyone had roamed about the place, in twos and threes. Some into the gloomy, shuttered house, some into the courtyard,—some further afield. Sir Rupert and Inez were among the latter. They sauntered down mossy walks, down broken marble steps, and finally came to anchor under a wide-spreading tree, that seemed to grow out of the boundary wall.

Seating herself suddenly, Inez threw away her cigarette, and said :

"Is it not strange, that this place is shut up, and no one will live here ?"

"And why not ?" inquired Sir Rupert, looking back up the garden, and surveying the premises. "Ghosts ! or the Evil Eye ? It has been an imposing residence in its day !"

"Oh! you may laugh!" returned Inez, "but there are ghosts, and there *is* an evil eye. Fernandez Sandello says, that that house has such a bad name, that although it is so near the town, no one will live in it. People have tried, but a week,—and sometimes one night—has been enough. Santa Maria! Santa Maria!" she exclaimed with a start, "What is that moving among the bananas?"

"Nothing but the wind! You are full of superstitious fancies. What is the wonderful story about the house? Believe me, ghosts are nothing more or less, than *rats!*"

"Are they?" she exclaimed indignantly; "you would not say so if you were to see them."

"Them! Are there more than one?" he asked, with a smile. "In England we don't run to more than one at a time!"

"There are two here," she returned, with the deepest gravity, nodding her head towards the grey, weather-stained building, "a man and a girl! He murdered her, stabbed her in the throat! He was jealous."

"The brute! I hope he was hanged," exclaimed Sir Rupert, poking up some weeds with the end of his riding-cane.

"Ah! you cold English, don't understand what jealousy *means*,—you make no allowance!"

"I make no allowance for any man who could murder a defenceless woman," replied Sir Rupert, with emphasis.

"No! not when she gave him cause for jealousy?" inquired his fair companion, with wide-open eyes.

"Not even *then*, could I understand it," he replied imperturbably.

"Well! *I* can!" she burst out fiercely; "I myself, would kill anyone who came between me, and my love."

Then reaching for a pomegranate blossom, which she held to her lips, she added in a lower, and softer key:

" For instance, I could murder any woman, who dared to come between you and *me !* "

This was a startling announcement ! but it came in the most natural and everyday manner from the Señorita's pretty lips.

Sir Rupert removed his wide-leaved sombrero, passed his hand across his forehead, and glanced uneasily at his companion.

" I can be jealous, I can tell you," she proceeded, in a confident, half-boastful tone. " Father Pedro tells me, that I have a *devil* within me, and though you might not think it, Ruperto Caro, I am sure I have at times ! I cannot express what I felt at that Bal Masque, when I saw you dancing with Carmina Salvano. Dio Mio ! I felt inclined to take a knife, and stab her," she concluded, in a tone of angry conviction.

" Of course, you are joking ! you never felt anything of the sort," said Sir Rupert, gravely, but as he looked down into the dark eyes beside him, he felt instinctively, that they were the windows from which a fiery and implacable nature looked forth ; and that in the fair bosom of the Spanish girl in the linen habit, who was leaning back against the old tree, and gazing up into his face —there was a large supply of incandescent lava, which might some day burst forth, and overwhelm all before it !

" Tell me," she said abruptly, laying her hand on his arm, " did you ever love a girl in your own country ? "

Here was indeed a crucial question, and her companion changed countenance, beneath the eager scrutiny of her questioning eyes.

" Ah ! I see you did ! What was she like ? Who was she ? What came between you ? " she asked eagerly, in her own tongue.

For some seconds, she received no answer.

Sir Rupert's gaze was fastened on the horizon, and there was a fixed resolve in his look, that the fair Inez failed to interpret correctly.

"Did she prove untrue?" approaching him, and laying her face sympathetically on his arm.

"Yes," he answered shortly, drawing his arm away by a brusque movement. "She—but never mind, why should we speak of her?"

Then after a long pause the Señorita resumed:

"Is it true, what Captain Torrens told me this morning, that—that you are anxious to go home—to go back to England?" she asked in a curious voice.

"Yes, we have overstayed our time as it is.—We really must make a start soon."

"Ah! And is *this* the way you can talk—'must make a start soon,' and are anxious to go, when you know, you will be leaving *me* behind? Oh! how can you?" suddenly bursting into a storm of sobs, and simultaneously casting herself into his reluctant arms. "If you go, if you leave me, Mio Ruperto," she gasped, "you will break my heart!"

The unfortunate man now found himself in a most embarrassing situation. What on earth was he to do with this girl, who was clinging to him, and declaring that her heart was breaking? He must speak out *plainly*, and at once!

"My dear Inez," he began in a tone of gentle expostulation, "you don't know what you are saying; you are overwrought; you are not yourself!" vainly endeavouring to disengage himself from her clinging embrace. "We are good friends, and I have spent a pleasant month in your father's house, and will never forget your hospitality and kindness,—but when you say, you will break your heart at my departure,—I know that you are joking!"

"Don't you understand me?" cried Inez, suddenly drawing back, and glaring at him with blazing eyes, and the air of a young Pythoness about to strike. "Do you mean to tell me, that you do not love me? Answer me! answer me!" she demanded, with a stamp of her foot.

"I have a real regard for you as a friend, -but why should I deceive you? No, I do not love you,—that sort of thing is over for me,—I can never love twice!"

"Then, Santa Dios! what is to become of *me?*" cried his companion, wringing her hands in an agony of despair. . "Why did I ever see you? Madré Adorata!" cried this frantic young woman, "I shall go mad,—mad —I shall *die*," and without a second's warning she cast herself prone, in the long grass at his feet,—in an abandonment of misery, and a paroxysm of grief!

Far from being proud of his conquest, her companion felt a horrible qualm of pain, and humiliation, as he surveyed this lamentable exhibition. To think, that this untutored daughter of the tropics, this child of unrestrained emotions, should so far forget her womanly instincts, as to fling her heart, and herself, at the feet of a man—undesired, and unasked.

The sobbing Señorita, far from melting him into tenderness, overwhelmed him with repulsion, and shame. However, he lost no time in raising her, and replacing her in her former seat, and soothing her by all the means at his command. When her long-drawn sobs and gasps, had somewhat abated, he spoke to her gravely. In as few words as possible, he sketched the outline of his own disastrous love affair; he gave her his confidence unreservedly; told her how he had doubted, and cast off Helen,—and that now in return, she had abandoned him.

"But I can never care for anyone else," he declared emphatically.—"I only wish I could,—but it would be

useless to try. If I were to endeavour to forget her,—in making love to another girl, her face would always come between us!"

"Then she must be bad! she must," cried Inez; "she has the evil eye, she won't marry you herself, nor let you marry anyone else!"

For fully half an hour, Sir Rupert talked to his unhappy companion, pleaded with her like a brother; talked the plainest commonsense; and at the end of that time, thanks to his eloquence, his air of resolution, and absolute self-command; the fair Inez, was convinced, that the case was hopeless!

The Caballero at her side, had bestowed every grain of his affection on a pale-faced English Donna, and as far as she was concerned, his heart was as hard as marble. There was no more to be said; no use in striving with the impossible; this was the third disappointment she had met with;—for Inez was a young lady of inflammable temperament, who had twice before fixed her hopes on the unattainable. Once, these hopes had been centred on one of the King of Spain's aide-de-camps; once, on a delightful Italian Count; but neither of her former admirers, had been as irresponsive, or as cold, as this stony-hearted Englishman!

A few minutes later, they were wending their way down the shallow steps, and up the mossy walks, through a tangled mass of lovely, neglected, tropical shrubs, and flowers. These, were loading the evening air with their rich, and languorous perfume, and in some places, actually barricaded the narrow, overgrown paths. The moon had risen, and the party were already contemplating a speedy departure, when Sir Rupert and Inez passed out of the garden wilderness, into the moon-flooded courtyard.

CHAPTER XXXV

SIR RUPERT not unnaturally avoided Señorita Inez Carvalho *en route* home. He fell behind, as they entered a narrow track in the woods, and gradually drew back, until he brought up the rear, alone. He was riding with his hat off, at a slow pace, buried in some not very agreeable reflections, when he was suddenly roused from his reverie, by finding that another equestrian had joined him.—A man with whom he had a slight acquaintance, one of Inez's rejected admirers, a Brazilian *pur et simple !* with a peaked black beard, and narrow slits of black eyes, set close together, in a thin, sallow face.

"I have to congratulate Señor Ruperto," doffing his sombrero, and reining in his horse with the other hand, "on his conquest ! How fortunate the Caballero must think himself, to carry away the affections of one of our Rio belles ! "

"I don't know what you mean," returned Sir Rupert, brusquely, "you must speak plainer ! "

"The Señor," returned the other, with an evil sneer, "will doubtless understand me, when I tell him, that I was behind the plane tree this afternoon,—and saw all ! "

Sir Rupert for a moment was totally unable to find speech.

"Yes," continued the other, glaring into his eyes, and drawing out each word, as if it were a dagger ; "I saw the Señorita cast herself into your arms ; I heard her offer herself, and her love,—Santos Dios ! I even beheld her at your *feet !* "

"Well, if you did," returned Sir Rupert boldly, "I am sure you are a gentleman, and will never allow what you have told me, to pass your lips! I may rely upon you!"

"Yes! you may rely upon *me*," responded Señor Pasco, in a peculiar tone.

"She was labouring under a mistake, a delusion, it was a slight hysterical attack; the sooner we all forget it the better!" And Sir Rupert made a movement, as though he would canter on.

"Not so fast, my gay Caballero!" cried the other, laying a heavy hand upon his reins. "You have not told me, if you love the beautiful Inez?"

"What is that to you?" returned Sir Rupert angrily. "Why should we talk of her,—what is she to *you?*"

"Everything!—for I love her myself," replied Señor Pasco.

"Oh! you do, do you?"

"Yes! and you have stepped in, and gained her affections, and thrown them aside like an old glove. For this," he added with a slow and deadly smile, "I am going to give you a lesson—a lesson that will show you, that gay young travelling Inglese, may not come here, and gather and trample on, an honest man's belongings. For this," suddenly raising his voice, "I am going to *kill* you!"

Sir Rupert was a man of iron courage, but he naturally put his hand to where he carried his revolver,—the pocket was empty!

"No! no, not in that way," said Pasco, readily interpreting the movement. "I do not mean to murder you,—and have a bother with the English Consul—the Duello! will answer just as well; my second will wait on you to-night!"

"Do you suppose, that I am going to fight you, and have Señorita Inez' name dragged through the mud? Do you think, I am mad?" demanded the Englishman sternly.

"I think," said the other, rising in his peaked saddle, and speaking with undescribable scorn, "that if you are not mad, you are a coward—and take *that!*" dealing him such a sudden blow across the mouth, that it caused him to reel, and before Sir Rupert could recover, his challenger had galloped down a side-road, and was lost to sight.

After this insult, there was no alternative; Sir Rupert would listen to no expostulations from his friend—who talked himself hoarse that same night, as he paced his tesselated apartment from end to end.

"It's simply monstrous! the idea of going out with a sweep like that; no one fights a duel in these days; think of what everyone at home will say; they will say, that you are stark, staring mad! and that *I* was a criminal, to allow this meeting to take place! Supposing you fall! remember you are the last of your family. —and the name becomes extinct."

"*Someone* must be the last of a family," returned the last of the Lynns, "and I don't think it really matters! Any way, I'm going to fight!"

Sir Rupert's usually cool temperament, was consumed by a sense of raging passion, and a craving to wipe out the insult, that had been offered to him that afternoon.

"The *Cotopaxi* sails to-morrow, you know," pursued his friend, "why not go in her? What's the good of risking your life, for a mere——"

"Thank you, Torrens," interrupted his friend, angrily, "I had no idea, that you held such a lofty idea of me, and my courage! So I am to turn tail, and bolt

from this blackguard, in to-morrow's mail boat? It would be an eternal disgrace, to the name of Englishmen,—not to speak of the name of Lynn. I would a thousand times rather leave my bones out here, than live a long life, under such a stigma! I'd feel like a beaten hound to the end of my days! Duels have exploded in England,—it is more than a hundred years ago, since an officer was hanged in Newry, for a duel across a mess-table—but here, we must do as Rome does! Imagine the agreeable notoriety, I would gain, if I were handed down to posterity, as the Englishman who was challenged by a Brazilian, and who *ran away!* No, no! better be the last of my line, than that! I feel that fellow's blow is scorching into my very bone, and I shall never rest, until I have had *some* redress," he concluded fiercely.

"And supposing you fall?" exclaimed his friend; "supposing that by sun-down to-morrow, we have buried you in the English Cemetery!"

"Supposing that you *have*," replied Sir Rupert quietly, "at least you will have the satisfaction of burying a man of honour!"

"And you are to fight with swords; I hear Pasco is one of the most accomplished fencers in Rio; he will spit you like a sparrow," continued Captain Torrens gloomily, "he is as wiry, and active as a monkey,—the little brute!"

"You forget, Torrens, that I was in a Cavalry Regiment, and can fence a bit too," said his principal mildly; "you need not give me over *yet*, and should I be wounded to-morrow, Tor, I want you to promise me *one* thing."

"What?" asked the other sharply.

"To take me on board the *Cotopaxi*, there they have an English surgeon, and it will be all the same to me,

whether I am on sea or land,—anyway it will be better than being laid up in an hotel, and *whatever* happens, for God's sake, don't let me be brought back to Santa Catherina."

He shrank instinctively from being received on the footing of an interesting invalid, and nursed to convalescence, by the too appreciative Inez.

"I never met with such a cold-blooded, matter-of-fact fellow," exclaimed Captain Torrens indignantly, "why, need you run the chance of being wounded, if not killed,—from a mere spurious sense of honour!"

And here he recapitulated all his arguments.

The Brazilian was not Sir Rupert's equal, he was not even a gentleman, he had sought the quarrel solely to gratify his injured vanity. Was Sir Rupert to fall a victim to the overbearing arrogance, of a fourth-class Brazilian wine-merchant?

However, he talked to the wind, his friend was deaf as the traditional adder, and just as the faintest streaks of dawn were glimmering above the horizon, and the ubiquitous sparrows, were beginning to twitter, the challenged and his second, sallied forth in dead silence, for the place of meeting. The rendezvous, was about a mile away, under the walls of an old white convent, on the banks of the magnificent Rio Grande.

They rode between palms and cacti, past dusty india-rubber trees, high walls, and big gateways, till they came within sight of their goal. They were the first in the field; it was a chilly, raw morning; a damp, cold, white mist, still overhung the river, and the plains, like a gauzy pall, or veil,—soon to be withdrawn by the bold young sun.

In five minutes more, the other party, which included a doctor, had ridden up, and the combatants

were confronting one another in their shirt-sleeves,—eye to eye, and foot to foot.

The Englishman was not altogether the easy prey on which Señor Pasco had reckoned. True, he was immeasurably his own inferior, as a fencer; but he was tall, and active, ready and cool,—but lacked the wonderful dexterity of wrist, that signalized the Brazilian, his cat-like litheness, and his skill of feint,—nevertheless, he possessed undisputably a cool head, and a brave heart.

What would any of Sir Rupert's friends say, could they behold him now? the perfect type of a calm, self-contained, unromantic young Englishman, standing here by the river, in the misty morning air, with the weapon of an adversary playing round him like steel lightning; and all for the sake of a little, dark-eyed coquette,—for whom he did not care even *one* straw!

Señor Pasco had lost his temper; the calm, unmoved manner, in which the stranger had parried, and stopped his most deadly thrusts (acting on the defensive), threw him into a livid fury. He became wild; he became impetuous; he became incautious, and Sir Rupert, seeing his advantage, pressed forward, and gave his adversary a very ugly cut on the forearm.

This was first blood; and it acted as a spell on Señor Pasco. Once more he was stealthy, and collected; he recalled the jaguar of his native forests, in creeping, stealing, and springing; he cursed and swore blasphemously, he sprang here, he sprang there, as though on wires, delivering each thrust with a blood-curdling oath; and in time, he wore down his unpractised opponent, and seizing his moment, with a yell of triumph, buried his weapon in Sir Rupert's breast! He did not wait to hear if the wound was pronounced fatal, he merely wiped

his sword, cast one glance of exultant hatred at the figure on the ground,—whose life-blood was oozing through his white shirt-front—and calling for his horse, assuming his poncho and sombrero, he leapt lightly into the saddle, and galloped off.

The *Cotopaxi* did carry away the traveller, after all. Captain Torrens was resolute; he refused to listen to the combined entreaties, expostulations, and lamentations, of the Carvalho family, and removed his friend on board ship,—in spite of a most animated resistance. It was more than likely, that Lynn would die.—He was wounded in the lungs, and the ship's surgeon, had but faint hopes of the case.

Naturally the duel was hushed up as much as possible, but the more it was hushed up, the more it was talked about; talked about secretly, confidentially, and mysteriously; various indeed were the reasons assigned; after the first real cause was settled—(a woman, of course! the Señorita Inez Carvalho)—equally, of course, amazing stories kept circulating round patios, and verandahs; and if these stories could only have been confined to the Brazils, it did not greatly matter; but why!—oh malicious fate!—did some side-wind carry the tale to Europe?

There were paragraphs in a society paper; the story was whispered over tea-tables; and in more than one club smoking-room; it was said, that Sir Rupert Lynn, who spent half his time in roaming about, had got into a nasty scrape in Rio, with a Spanish girl—had been called out by her brother; was dangerously wounded in the lungs, and lay at St. Thomas,—not expected to recover.

Needless to ask if this tale came to Miss Browne's ears? Of course it did!

CHAPTER XXXVI

TOWARDS the end of December, the MacGregors, and their cousin Helen,—who had been abroad all the autumn ;—returned to the delightful *pied à terre*, with Lady Lesborough. They had been nearly a year in Europe and were beginning to discuss their return to Australia in the Spring. At times Helen was half-inclined to accompany them—after all, what had she to detain her in England ? " Many friends and not a few lovers," the popular voice would have promptly replied. Yes ! but were not most of these, fair-weather friends ? she asked herself bitterly ; her days of real happiness in England, had been few and far between ; why not return to the scenes of her childhood ; reopen the old house in Toorak, and live among familiar surroundings ? Perhaps Katie would accompany her ? as she was always longing to see new worlds !

Katie was in better health than she had been for years, but excepting by her father—Katie was not appreciated at home ; Lulu, her friend, and ally, was now incarcerated at school.

But this idea of returning to the colonies was derided, and scouted, by all who heard the subject mentioned. Even her Aunt and Uncle MacGregor, set their faces against it.

Helen was to make her home in England ; it was well-known, that this had always been her father's intention, and that had he been spared, he had hoped to end his days in his native land ! But where was she to live ? She did not venture to put the question to her little circle point blank. Was she to cast in her lot with

Lady Lesborough?—or was she, a girl of two-and-twenty, to set up house-keeping alone,—or was she to return to Thornhurst? Horror!

What her relations really hoped, and expected was,—that ere they sailed for Melbourne, Helen would have stepped into a more exalted sphere, and have become a Peeress of England, and Lady Wandsworth! But this was not to be; and after all, Aunt and Uncle MacGregor, when they conferred together; agreed, that there was not very much in the young man,—beyond his castles, and his clothes!

The news of Sir Rupert's "scrape" had been talked about, and written about, it came to Helen's knowledge in various ways, and besides this, she received a nice long letter from her Cousin Blanche—which gave her the fullest details.

"My dearest Helen,

"What a wretched correspondent you are! You have not written to me for ages,—you really are *hopeless*. Now you are back in Lowndes Square,—which is very central, I want you to do, a few little commissions for me! I want you to call in at Madame Jabot's, and see if she has cleaned and mended my lace! and go and ask at Parish's, in Sloane Street, *why* they have not sent me down those blouses on approval? and my maid wants eleven yards of the enclosed pattern of taffeta, from Woolland's. I suppose *you* have got all your winter clothes! My best frock will be dark blue velvet, and chinchilla,—frightfully smart!

"When are you coming down to us? Katie is panting to see you. She is much better, and is really able to walk about almost like anyone else: that imp Lulu, has, as you know, been packed off to school in Brussels. She wept floods of tears, when the verdict went forth;

serves her right, the horrid young monkey, for anything to equal her temper, her tongue, and the way she behaved to her late governess, I could not describe! You were *very* sly about Tavy Wandsworth. I hear he followed you all the way to Aix-les-Bains, and you gave him the cold-shoulder! My dear girl, if you saw what à jolly old place Wortwith Castle is, and if you saw the family diamonds, you would certainly waver,—and really Tavy is not half a bad young man,—as young men go—and absolutely devoted to *you*; you could twist him round your little finger!

"Talking of bad young men, have you heard of Rupert's escapade? Still waters run deep. We had a letter from Captain Torrens, trying to make light of the whole affair, and evidently awfully anxious to hush it up; but I am afraid the story is known far, and wide! It seems that Rupert carried on tremendously with some pretty Spanish girl, and refused to make the *amende honorable*—in other words—to marry her, but wished to love, and to ride away. However, one of her brothers came to the front, and demanded satisfaction on behalf of his sister. Rupert was obliged to fight a duel, and was badly wounded in the lungs. I understand he has paid a heap of money to the family, and they have consented to hush up the scandal. However, I believe it is a bad business, and I don't think Rupert will venture to show his face in England for some time. Anyway Captain Torrens is returning *alone!*

"Mother and Katie send their love, in which I join.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"BLANCHE DESPARD.

"P.S.—You might think twice of Tavy."

On receipt of this amiable effusion, Helen did not cast a single glance towards Lord Wandsworth, his castle,

or his diamonds; but she thought a good deal on the subject of the other young man mentioned in the letter. She distrusted Blanche's confidences, but in this case, they were corroborated by the open-mouthed purveyors of scandal, and even if appearances were not to be trusted, was there not an old proverb that said: "There is never smoke without a fire!"

After she had allowed the subject to rankle in her mind for nearly a week, Helen began to take Blanche's advice, and to "think twice" of Tavy! Tavy had several things to recommend him. In the first place, he could give her a home! By marrying him she would please her relations, the MacGregors; she would have Elspeth to stay with her, and give her what is called "a good time." Katie, too, would be a welcome guest, and she would be in a position to show Sir Rupert Lynn, that she was not disposed to "wear the willow!" Tavy was good-tempered, good-natured, easy to get on with, neither jealous, nor exacting, but—it must be confessed—*not* over-burdened with brains! Still, a very clever husband might not be an unalloyed blessing. Sir Rupert indisputably had plenty of brains, but then he was jealous, mistrustful, hot-tempered, and worse than all—inconstant!

Blanche was nearly right,—but not quite; Helen, with all her newly-sharpened indignation, could not bring herself to call him "bad."

The MacGregors, their daughter, and Helen, were paying a visit to a large and fashionable country-house. Their hosts were old friends; wealthy Australians, who had bought an estate, and settled down in the mother-country.

Helen's large American trunks and the lovely frocks inside them, hinted at dances, and an immense amount

of dressing, and gaiety, but Helen took little interest in the various entertainments, that were set going for the amusement of the guests. The only thing she really cared about, was riding. She enjoyed hunting, and accompanied by her Uncle MacGregor, the "Colonial young lady," went across country, in a manner, and a style, that wrung the heart of her Cousin Blanche,—as she perforce remained among the mob on the hard, high road.

Kingsford, the residence of the Erskines, was within fifteen miles of Thornhurst; so Helen saw something of her relatives. The Erskines were hospitable people, and liked to have their house full of guests—and not merely for three days—or week-ends.—Among these, strange to say, was Captain Torrens, who arrived at Kingsford a certain dark evening, in time to dress for dinner, and to present himself, and his immense expanse of shining shirt-front, in the drawing-room, just before that important meal. He gazed appreciatively round the bright luxurious apartment, as he stood before one of the fireplaces with his back to the logs, and witnessed one pretty girl after another come sailing into the room, enhanced by the becoming set-off of a dinner toilette; but not one of these, could hold a candle to the last comer: the divinity in pale blue chiffon, with a diamond bandeau in her hair! And *he* was to have the happiness of taking this young lady in to dinner! This fact, had been notified to him by his hostess,—when she formally presented him to Miss Browne.

"Not much of a name!" he said to himself, as he unfolded his napkin and arranged his glasses, previous to discussing his soup. After the soup, he refreshed himself with a glass of sherry, and a good look at his fair neighbour. "Browne may be her undistinguished

name, but she had good blood in her veins—the outline of her perfect profile, her small ears, the shape of her hands, all loudly in their own way proclaimed 'blue blood.'"

But she was silent—not disposed to talk—not inclined to amuse him. He pulled his stiff little moustache reflectively, and asked himself, if, as she was a beauty and an heiress, she was not standing on her privileges, and expecting *him* to entertain her? Well, he would see about it after the entrées;—and until then, their conversation was monosyllabic.

By and by, they plunged into the topic of pantomime, the late runs with the hounds, some recent grand weddings in high life; but Miss Browne avoided the name of Brazil, or any allusion to foreign countries.

However, a little old gentleman opposite, with a bald head, and a very sharp face, was by no means so reticent. Helen had *seen* him listening—all eagerness—and evidently most anxious to get in a word, for nearly five minutes. At last, he saw his chance, and leaning across the table, said to her companion:

"By the way, Torrens, what have you done with Lynn?"

"Oh! I left him at St. Thomas," returned that gentleman placidly; "he was in no hurry to get home,—and *I* was!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the little old gentleman, wrinkling up his nose in an unpleasant smile; "*you* had no attractions out there,—and he *had*. That was a nice business about the Spanish girl! Lynn's a good-looking fellow, and by all accounts, played the deuce among the Señoras!" he concluded, with a hard old laugh, that seemed to come from the back of his head. —His heart was merry with wine, and he was disposed

to be both loquacious, and indiscreet; but his efforts at drawing out Captain Torrens, were nipped by that young man, in the bud. He affected temporary deafness, and turned his attention to his fair neighbour. How pale she was—curiously pale! It was rather becoming to her statuesque-looking profile, this excessive pallor; but certainly he had imagined that she possessed some colour, when he had been presented to her before dinner! They talked the usual dinner-table commonplaces, and more than once it struck him, that Miss Browne had opened her mouth as if to speak; but that, by some curious process, the words she wished to utter,—had died upon her lips. It never occurred to him for a moment, that she took the smallest interest in his late fellow-traveller, and that though she sat by his side outwardly a perfectly composed and well-bred young woman, inwardly, she felt a devouring fire of aching anxiety to hear from his lips, the true facts of what had led to his friend's duel, how that friend was? and when he might be expected in England? Pride closed her mouth,—nevertheless, the society of Captain Torrens had a strange fascination, for his neighbour. She hovered round and round the topic of his Brazilian experiences, as a moth does round a candle, but as yet she had never rushed into the flame, with any direct or incriminating inquiries.

She was very lovely, he thought; clever, intelligent, and exhibited a flattering interest in his late experience. She was well-posted in the physical geography of South America; she had read the Conquest of Peru, and Mexico; and many recent books of travel;—relating to the Brazils. He never imagined for a moment, that she had a special interest in that part of the globe, or that her studies were the effect, of which his journey to the West, had been the cause!

CHAPTER XXXVII

TWO or three evenings later, most of the party at Kingsford were assembled in the old oak-panelled hall, discussing tea and hot cakes, and the late run. Several of the company had been followers that day, but there were one or two daintily tea-gowned figures, sunken in luxurious low chairs, who believed it was much pleasanter to sit over a good fire, with an interesting novel, this bitter winter weather, than to go tearing across country, over enormous fences, and ploughed land, like Miss MacGregor and Miss Browne, who had just joined the refined circle, with rosy faces, muddy habits, and an air of aggravating self-satisfaction! They had both ridden hard, and earned the praises of their gentleman friends, and the plaudits of their self-esteem, and were now prepared for the gentle *délassement* of tea, poached eggs, and conversation.

Helen sank into a comfortable low-cushioned seat, and accepted a hot cake, and a plate from Captain Torrens' respectful hands, and that gentleman, having provided for himself, speedily found accommodation beside her, and commenced a series of criticisms, and remarks about their capital run from Goddington's Gorse. Another sportsman, tea-cup in hand, showed an amiable, and perhaps not unnatural desire to share in the delights of Miss Browne's conversation; and drawing a chair gently into her neighbourhood, subsided thereon. They talked of the run, and horses, finally of hunting-men, and young Mr. Spiller, was enthusiastic respecting the riding of a certain "Tommy Pratt."

" He took the iron gate into the turnpike road, without winking,—it was simply 'neck or nothing.' I'm blessed if I ever saw such a beggar to ride!—Lynn is another of the same class, and he can ride anything that has hair on it; but he has done no hunting this year. Taken to be a regular globe-trotter," he added contemptuously.

" Ah, well, I daresay he'll be here by the end of the season," said Captain Torrens, " and show you all the way."

" Oh! by Jove!" exclaimed the other, abruptly, as if struck by a sudden idea, " that was a curious affair out in Brazil! I never heard the ins and outs of it. What was it all about? Fancy Lynn, of all people, playing the romantic, serenading, duelling dodge!"

" My dear fellow, if I've told the story *once*, I've told it twenty times. Only this very morning at the meet, I was button-holed by that terrible bore, Eyre Hall, and interviewed by him with as much pertinacity, as if he had been an American reporter!"

" Well, it is all the same," declared Mr. Spiller, " he is the greatest gossip in town, and whatever you have told him, will be in the smoking-room of every London club, before the week is out. 'Hear-all,' as they call him, is better than any newspaper,—I hope you remembered *that*, when you gave him your confidence!"

" That I did, you may swear! The people over here, have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, so it was just as well to tell the old boy the truth,—and let him start a fresh story."

" And what *is* the story?" inquired Mr. Spiller, rising to take Helen's cup, " the true and accurate account of how a very cool and collected fellow of our acquaintance, fell in love with a pretty Brazilian, and fought a duel on her account! Come now, Torrens, begin!

Make it as interesting as you can,—and touch it up with a bit of local colour ! "

" It has been too much touched-up, and coloured already," replied Torrens, crossing his legs, and speaking in a tone of suppressed irritation. " It has been improved out of all recognition. The facts of the case are these. But perhaps," suddenly turning to Helen, " this will bore you ! "

" Not at all," she answered with nervous haste, " do go on, please, and tell us all about the duel. So unusual, —so—er—interesting——" she stammered.

" Well ! " proceeded Captain Torrens, joining the tips of his fingers together, and leaning back in his chair. " Lynn and I went to Rio together, and a man out there, connected with our Silver Mines, put us up. He was uncommonly friendly, and hospitable,—and had two extremely pretty daughters."

" Ah ! " ejaculated Mr. Spiller, with expressive significance.

" Yes," continued the other, " the dark-eyed, alluring style. Lynn and I went off ; explored ; prospected ; travelled ; and returned to Rio at the end of five months,—and were received with open arms, by Señor Carvalho's household."

—" Ah ! really—you don't say so ? " Mr. Spiller again interrupted with ironical amusement.—

" The Señoritas were delightful, no two opinions about *that !* They made no end of us. Rode with us, danced with us, star-gazed with us,—and taught us how to flirt."

" I shouldn't think you had much to learn in that line," said Mr. Spiller, with a laugh ; " but how did Lynn get on ? Was he a promising pupil ? "

" No ! I cannot say that he was. He did not make the most of his opportunities ; he was more or less a passive victim,—and the unlucky young lady, instead

of drawing him, into her net,—fell into the snare herself, and became most flagrantly, and idiotically in love with the stony-hearted Englishman ! "

" *Après ?* " demanded Mr. Spiller, with an air of rapt attention—and slightly raised brows.

" *Après ?* As far as I could see, she bothered the very life out of Lynn ; he was dying to cut the whole concern, and come home, but the affairs of the mine delayed us. I believe one of the Señorita's admirers was furiously jealous,—naturally perhaps, seeing that she had no longer eyes, or ears, for any of her own compatriots ; he sought a quarrel, and Lynn was ready,—foolishly ready,—to oblige him ! Pasco was a regular little bounder ! A common, underbred blackguard, not worth a charge of shot ! but Lynn was the challenged ! He would have his own way ; they fought early one morning, by the banks of the Rio Grande ; the Brazilian was a noted duellist, and after meeting with a cool, steady resistance, that nearly drove him frantic, he ran Lynn through the lungs, and went off *laughing !* The Carvalhos were in an awful state ; they wanted to nurse the wounded man, of course,—but we had had enough of Señorita Inez, and I carried her victim to the steamer on the spot ; he was in a bad way for days, and quite off his head at times ; however, when we parted at St. Thomas, he was fairly convalescent, and able to crawl out into the sun. He intends to come home by the States, so he tells me ! "

" And do you mean to say he did not care about the girl ? " inquired Mr. Spiller, with round-eyed amazement, and an expression of mildly subdued unbelief.

" No more than you do," returned the other, with warm asseveration ; " no more "—turning to where Helen sat with straining ears but veiled eyes—" no more," triumphantly, " than he cares for Miss Browne ! "

A rich flood of colour suffused Miss Browne's cheeks at this declaration.

"And why was he so hard-hearted?" asked Mr. Spiller, judicially; "come now,—he must have had some reason!"

"Well, I think there was—you won't mention this?—some girl at home, I believe——"

"Who? I did not see him paying special attention to anyone last season;—he is not much of a society man."

"I don't know who she is, or was; but this I can tell you," proceeded Captain Torrens, who was certainly "garrulously given"; "he was awfully down on his luck when we left England, and for the first month or so in Brazil—something on his mind, and, not a word to throw to a dog!—and he used to be such a cheery fellow."

"Looked as if he was in love," said Mr. Spiller, with a laugh. "Eh? Miss Browne, what do you say?" appealing to Helen with a broad grin.

But Helen was past all power of distinct utterance, and a ghastly imitation of his own smile, was her only reply.

"And this was confirmed," proceeded Captain Torrens, dropping his voice confidentially, "when we were at sea,—and he was delirious; for, at other times, he was tremendously reserved, and close about his affairs—but when he was off his head, he was constantly muttering about some letter, always asking for it—and if it had come. It was really painful to listen, and to witness his terrible anxiety. He would declare over and over again, that I was keeping it from him, and all sorts of things. He used to try and get up, and search for this letter, and altogether was so stark, staring mad on one subject, that I made up a counterfeit epistle,

addressed it in a lady's hand, sealed it, and gave it to him, to put an end to his incessant, and wearisome questions."

"Well!" inquired the other gentleman, "did *that* satisfy him?"

"Yes, in a way,—he was too weak to open or read it, so I put it under his pillow, and he seemed to be perfectly happy as long as he had it in his hand."

"Poor beggar! Are you sure it was a letter from a woman? Maybe it was about money, just as likely,—and from a man."

"You may be right," replied Captain Torrens, with a little sarcastic bow, "but I have never yet met a man with the name of 'Helen.'"

"Oh! so that was her name! And when he came to his senses,what did he think of the little joke you played upon him about the dummy letter?"

"When he began to come round, I just slipped it away when he was asleep—and I fancied that I saw him searching for it, but no doubt the poor fellow thought the whole thing was a *dream*."

"And naturally, you never undeceived him."

"Need you ask?" rejoined Captain Torrens.

"Well! it has been a most interesting recital on the whole. What do you think, Miss Browne?" said Mr. Spiller, turning towards her.

"Oh, very," she replied with an effort,—an effort that was not noticed by her companions. To them, she had merely appeared silent, uninterested, and perhaps a little bored!

"Torrens! Lady Darvill is calling you; don't you see her gestures of command? You had better go, and find out what she wants, and I'll take your chair. Now, Miss Browne," continued Mr. Spiller, in a tone of intimate confidence, "did you ever know such a sieve in

your life as that fellow? I think Lynn shows a vast amount of discretion, in keeping his affairs to himself! And from what *I* know of him, he would be in a towering rage, if he dreamt that Torrens had been lifting the veil from his little heart secrets, for our amusement! You don't know Lynn, I believe? He is seldom at Cardew! A rattling good sort, and I've often wondered, what he saw in that blithering idiot! Oh! are you going?" as Helen rose. "Well, no doubt you'll be glad to get rid of your habit! This half hour before the dressing-bell, is the most deadly time of the day. One is too sleepy to read, too hungry to talk, too late to cut in to Bridge. Ah, well!" picking up her hunting-crop, and handing it towards her—"the best friends must part. *Au revoir!*"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

HELEN'S mind was in a ferment, when she reached her room! She did not ring for her maid, nor divest herself of her habit, but merely sat before the fire, with her hands locked round her knees, her eyes intent on the hot coals, and her heart given up to a raging conflict, between doubt, and joy. If Rupert had expected a letter, and it was not a mere species of mental craze, connected with his illness,—he must have written to *her!* Where, then, was his letter? Apparently she was in his mind, she and no one else. His friend Captain Torrens, had unintentionally cleared him. This was the conviction she arrived at, as she reluctantly brought her day-dreams to an end, and rose, and rang for her maid.

Never, had her fellow guests seen Miss Browne so

brilliant or so animated as she was that evening, and why? Because Miss Browne's heart felt extraordinarily light, and the state of her mind was reflected in her face.

The Erskines—unaware of a little unpleasantness, that had formerly existed between Miss Browne and her relations at Thornhurst,—invited Miss Despard to spend two days at Kingsford, they were within reach of a notable meet, and were giving a dance the same evening, —needless to say, Blanche accepted with effusion.

It has been already stated, that Miss Despard was not much of a horsewoman. She had the ambition to shine in the hunting-field, but lacked two very necessary items,—skill, and nerve.

A large meet, with a little jogging from cover to cover, was precisely the kind of riding that suited Miss Despard. Just a nice orderly trot along the lanes;—mounted on a perfectly mannered steed, with an agreeable cavalier to ride at her bridle.—The morning of the meet, it turned out, that her own horse, Propriety, could not be ridden, he was lame!

"But perhaps you have something that would carry me?" she asked, turning her light eyes upon her host.

"Oh, well! I am afraid we have none that you would care about riding," he answered doubtfully. "Fireking shies,—and Volcano, pulls a good bit."

"You can have one of my hunters, Blanche, with pleasure," interposed Helen. "I have two here, and you shall take your choice! Would you like Wallaby?"

"I am afraid Wallaby would be a little too much for Miss Despard," protested the master of the house, "he is nervous, and wants to be ridden by someone like Miss Browne—with a *very* light hand."

"Oh, as to that, I have a light hand too, Mr. Erskine," said Blanche, reddening with anger. "I've never

seen him doing anything wonderful with Helen- he seems quiet enough I can ride every bit as well as she can,—in my *own* style. You fancy I am no horse-woman, because I don't hunt; but that is not the reason at all. I do not follow the hounds, nor go across country, simply because I think it is an amusement only for *men*,—and I do not approve of it for a woman!"

"Oh! well, all right, Miss Despard. If your cousin gives you the mount, and you think you can manage him, I am sure I shall only be too delighted to number you among our cavalry, and Wallaby shall be brought round for you at eleven o'clock. -I only hope to goodness," he muttered to himself, as he left the room, "that she won't give him a sore back!"

* * * * * *

At eleven o'clock, all the hunting-party were assembled in the hall, or on the steps. Various fine weight-carriers, and well-to-do looking hacks, were champing bits, and pawing gravel, in anticipation of a speedy start.

"Here comes Wallaby, Blanche," said her cousin, as a handsome chestnut was led, sidling up, "he looks a little fresh to-day; he'll be all right if you will give him a good breather across the park."

But Blanche's courage was rapidly oozing away at her fingers' ends, and she presented an abjectly limp, and miserable figure, when she and her "corky" steed, moved off with the rest of the party, *en route* to the "meet." She did not venture to follow most of them, in a wild gay gallop over the short turf. No, she and one or two others remained in the hard, gravelled avenue,—but it was all she could do to restrain Wallaby. He snorted, he tossed his head up and down, with

angry impatience, and he felt as light and airy on his legs, as if he were actually on wires!

"Oh! that she had bitten her tongue through, before she had ever expressed a desire to ride this devilish beast."

Out on the road, they all joined forces, and Wallaby asserted himself, by trotting out to the very front; he *would* lead the cavalcade, in spite of her, and the trot, trot, trot of his equine friends in the rear, merely hastened his movements; also he was bearing heavily on the bit, and nearly pulling her arms out. Then it all happened in a moment! Men were cutting timber, and a tree fell with a crash in a plantation close to the road, and Wallaby made one mad plunge forward, threw up his head, snatched the reins out of his rider's cold and aching hands; and—accompanied by another horse,—"bolted!" For about a quarter of a mile, it was a neck and neck race! Blanche clinging to the mane, and shrieking in a manner terrible to hear, the man on the other animal, sawing his horse's mouth, and muttering imprecations between his clenched teeth. At last he got a pull at him, and was able to draw up, but Wallaby still tore on, goaded to greater and greater exertions by the alarming shrieks, that were proceeding from his rider. For two miles, he continued his headlong career, clattered through the village where the hounds were assembled, —scattering the pack in all directions. Then, in suddenly darting round the sharp angle of a demesne wall, he lost his legs, and came down heavily, rolling over on his unfortunate burden.

The remainder of the party soon arrived upon the scene, and found Wallaby, with broken knees, and broken bridle, standing in the middle of the road, half-covered with mud, looking rather ashamed of

himself,—held by a little ragged boy; an old woman, the proprietor of an adjacent donkey and cart, supported Blanche, who was lying against a bank, to all appearances quite dead! But she was not dead,—only stunned, and badly injured; her ribs were crushed, her right leg was broken. Of course these misfortunes were not discovered there, on the roadside,—but when she had been carefully removed to Mr. Erskine's, and submitted to the inspection of no less than four doctors.

Undoubtedly the patient was in a bad way, it was a serious case,—her mother must be telegraphed for, at once.

Mrs. Despard, who had been in London, arrived by the first train the following morning, and was received by Helen. Her aunt's dismay was great,—greater than her actual grief.

Was it possible, that she was to be the mother of *two* crippled daughters? In that case, it were better almost that Blanche should die!

The patient's condition was so critical, that it was decided to prepare her for the worst. If, as was likely, inflammation were to set in, her life would be reckoned by hours,—but who was to tell her? Who was to undertake this painful office? Not her mother, oh no! She put the idea from her with a horrified shudder, "her trouble," she assured Mrs. Erskine, "was bitter enough without *that*."

Helen was her next nearest relative,—and the hours were flying. It was decided that she was to break it to her cousin, that her hours were numbered!

"Yes, my dear girl, you *must*," urged Mrs. Erskine, "you see her mother is so terribly cut up. Our Parson is from home this week,—it would be better for you to break it to her, than the doctor, and a *hint* in these cases is sufficient," she concluded in a whisper.

So, just as the lamps were beginning to be lighted, the shutters closed and daylight shut out, Helen stole into the sick-room on her fatal errand,—and the nurse crept down to her tea. The patient was lying on her back, her face as white as death, her glassy eyes fixed upon vacancy. Helen took a seat near the bed, and said very gently:

"How do you feel now, Blanche,—any easier?"

"Yes, I am not in much pain; not nearly as much as you would expect from all my broken bones. At first it was awful, but now I scarcely feel any pain at all."

Helen turned pale; this immunity from suffering, was the most deadly symptom. She glanced at the pinched face among the pillows, her lips parted as if about to speak, but there was such a huge lump in her throat.

"Why do you look at me so oddly, Helen? do you think I am so *very* ill?"

"Yes, dear, very ill," she returned in a low voice.

"Do you think I am going to die?" she asked in a horrified whisper.

"I cannot tell; you are in Heaven's hands,—we must all die some time," faltered Helen, piteously.

"I see you think badly of my chance!"

For some moments there was a dead silence, only broken by the loud ticking of a little clock on the mantelpiece. Helen could not utter a word; she was crying quietly; it seemed so awful to her, that this girl, but a few years older than herself, should now be standing alone on the threshold of another world; she, who but two days ago had seemed the strongest, and most long-lived looking of them all!

"Don't cry, Helen," came a voice from the bed,

"it hurts me desperately to see you crying for *me*. If you knew something, you would never look at me again,—much less shed a tear on my behalf!"

"If you mean about, when I was a governess, don't think of it, dear Blanche, I have freely forgiven everyone long ago, please put it out of your mind; and you must not talk or excite yourself; do let me read to you,"—reaching her hand, for a prayer-book.

"No, no;" with a weak gesture, "not yet. If I am dying I won't go, before I've confessed to you, and told you *all*. Helen, did you ever guess that I loved Rupert?"

"No! but why speak of such things now, dear Blanche?"

"Because I must, I *must*," she reiterated; "and you came between us, he never cared for me, but he might have,—if he had not seen you."

"Oh! please don't, Blanche! that is all at an end long ago."

"No, no, no, hear me patiently! Have you never guessed who it was who discovered Mrs. Hogan? Who it was, that confronted Rupert with Freddy? Who it was, that showed him your letter? Well!"—with a long painful gasp,—"it was *I!* I parted you then, as I thought for ever! but as the rich Australian cousin, you came back and retrieved all,—indeed more than all! Don't interrupt me *yet*," she continued, struggling for breath, "it was a hard matter to keep you and Rupert apart, but I poisoned your mind, and I roused his pride; I intercepted the letter, that he wrote to you after your meeting at Lady de Lacy's! I took it from the messenger, and sent word, that there was *no* answer. Yes! you may well look as if you were turned to stone. I did not open it: it is in the flap of my dressing-case, I have

looked at it often,—it is there now; the key is on that bunch—a small gilt one. Take it, and forgive me if you can." And Blanche, now completely exhausted, turned away her face, and breathed hard.

"Oh! Blanche," said Helen, rising, and at last finding speech, "I will not reproach you now; but, my dear, how could you? If you knew, how absolutely miserable the loss of that letter has made me, I am sure, you would never have taken it."

As she spoke, she put her hand before her face, and hot tears trickled through her fingers.

"Yes, I would have done it just the same; it was a case of possession!—Devilish possession," panted Blanche excitedly; "you had better know, at once how horribly wicked I am, so that you need not regret me too painfully. No one will grieve for me much,—nor do I deserve it. Now let me see you take your letter; that will be a load off my mind; go and get it now;" and Helen, after fumbling among strange keys, and bungling with a strange lock, discovered the long-lost missive, in one of the pockets of Blanche's dressing-case, and how gladly she possessed herself of the treasure it needs not to say, but this was neither time nor place for its perusal! She contented herself with thrusting it inside her dress, and resuming her place beside the patient; administering some drops, taking her temperature, and bathing her face and hands—for Blanche was utterly exhausted by her recent confession, and lay speechless and breathless; the only part of her that seemed alive, were her eyes; and these followed her cousin, with a sort of hungry interest.

Subsequently, when Blanche had fallen into a profound sleep, and the nurse had resumed her sway, Helen stole away to the privacy of her room, to read her long delayed letter. Yes, it was everything that it

ought to be! it even surpassed her highest expectations, and as she finished its perusal for the tenth time,—she felt angry with herself, for being so unfeelingly happy, when her cousin lay dying within a few yards. As to her cousin's behaviour about this very letter, what could she say?—Does not Death disarm us?

CHAPTER XXXIX

BUT Miss Blanche Despard was not going to die, after all; no, in this case,—she showed her usual obstinacy. Several doctors had positively declared, that she could not live, or that if she did,—it was a case in five hundred;—and it *was* the case in five hundred! Her wiry constitution asserted itself, her bones knit with incredible ease; her appetite never failed; her sleeping powers were marvellous; inflammation was kept at bay, and Blanche survived; let us hope to be, a wiser and a better woman. She was moved to a London Home, then by easy stages to the South of France, and soon she was able to be taken out in a bath-chair, along the "Promenade des Anglais," at Nice, and see the world once more! Her mother was with her, of course, but Katie and Helen, were looking after Mr. Despard at Thornhurst!

After a time, Blanche began to pick up her looks, and her spirits; to take an interest in society—and an especial interest in a good-looking, Italian Count,—who bore a faint resemblance to her cousin Rupert! The Count speedily developed a remarkable sympathy for the fair young invalid—a sympathy, that became more and more uncontrollable, as the rumours of her *dot* increased in magnitude. The young lady had

a nice little fortune of eight hundred a year,—left to her by her godmother, and namesake. This eight hundred a year would be gladly increased to a thousand, by her loving father, -if any decent fellow would take Blanche off his hands!

"Countess Ravani! Yes! it sounded rather well," said Blanche to herself; she would enjoy living in the sunny South, and it would be delightful, to inhabit an old villa near Florence, and to have a coronet on her pocket handkerchief. She knew a good many English who lived all the year round in the City of Flowers, and the soft *dolce far niente* of the Italian domestic life, appealed to her naturally indolent disposition. Already, in her own mind, she had entirely refurnished the ancient abode of the Ravanis. Persian and Turkish rugs—old Bric-à-brac, plate, linen, and china, would arrive in the form of wedding-presents; Father would give a motor, Mother a Grand piano, Katie and Lulu a silver tea-service, and Helen, who had heaps of money (Helen's forgiveness and generosity had salved over her readily appeased conscience)—and she was seriously debating in her own mind, whether Helen should give her diamonds or Russian Sables?—when the main-spring of the whole affair was ushered into her presence! He came at a propitious moment to press his suit, and he was by no means a bad-looking young fellow, slim, dark, and gentlemanly. He sang melting Italian love songs in a charming tenor; he danced divinely; and he was really rather in love with the pale-haired, pale-eyed, elegant-looking Miss Despard. "It would be a prudent marriage, a thousand a year, and possibilities,—on the death of the beef-eating father."

"There was no object in returning to England until the affair was concluded," thus wrote Mr. Despard,

whose desire to see his eldest daughter settled, and that in a foreign land, was scarcely flattering,—and did not say much for his parental affection! He, himself, would go out to Nice to clinch all arrangements,—and give Blanche away. Accordingly, early in April, all the English society, who were entitled to invitations, were present at a very smart wedding at the English church.

Blanche looked quite "the Countess," in a magnificent white wedding-gown, and she also wore some fine diamonds—Helen's wedding present. As she came down the aisle—now Madame Ravani, we may drop the curtain over her, and allow her to pass from the scene. Possibly it may appear, that she was fortunate beyond her deserts; and that by the just, poetical fitness of things, she ought to have been a soured, crippled, malignant old maid, to the end of her days,—but who knows what fate may yet have in store for her? Who knows, what stormy matrimonial outbursts may be enacted within the walls of the Villa Ravani? Who knows, that the Count be not a gambler? or a gay, and inconstant Lothario,—Who knows?

* * * * * *

When Mr. Despard went South to the wedding, Helen and Katie were left entirely to their own resources; they despatched their presents and good wishes, and kept the great festivity at home.

The couple had descended to the little Blue Drawing-room now, and enacted the part of "Ladies of the House." They were popular hostesses, and many of the neighbouring young people, liked to drop in at Thornhurst for a cup of five-o'clock tea; Katie Despard was so amusing,—and her cousin so pretty!

On one particular afternoon, Katie was doing the honours alone, and giving a detailed description of her sister's wedding to two lively young ladies, one active-minded elderly lady with a son on leave—who had come to have a look at the heiress,—and a tea-loving curate.

"And so your cousin, Sir Rupert, has come home at last?" said one of the Miss Fosters, as she helped herself to hot buttered tea-cake.

"Rupert come home?" echoed Katie; "pray how do you know? We have heard nothing about it!"

"How odd," said Mrs. Foster; "does he not write?"

"Sometimes, when the spirit moves him. Last we heard of him, he was at Chicago."

"Well, he is in England now,—and I daresay you will soon see him!"

"But how do you know?" inquired Katie.

"I travelled down with him last night," put in Captain Foster, as he helped himself to a second lump of sugar; "he was looking uncommonly fit,—told me, he had just come up from Liverpool, and had arrived in the *Antic*."

"We are pretty well used to his coming, and going, in a most sudden manner, but I do think——"

Whatever Katie really did think, was not to be disclosed at present; for her remark was interrupted by the entrance of the very gentleman in question.

"Talk of an angel!" cried Miss Letty Foster, in a tone of cordial welcome. "We had just been telling your cousin, you had arrived!"

"I think you *might* have written a line, Rupert," said Katie, after he had greeted everyone, and found a seat. "Now pray what have you to say for yourself?" handing him a cup of tea.

" We had a terrible time coming across the Atlantic, with a broken shaft, three weeks at sea,—I never was so sick of anything in my life,—my ideas are all mixed up, I have not found my land legs yet," then glancing towards the table—" Hullo ! what's this ? Looks like wedding-cake ! "

" And so it is," replied Katie ; " it would be a frightful blow to Gunter, if you mistook it for anything else ! "

" And who has been getting married, eh ? "

" Ah, who indeed ! You keep all your news to yourself,—so we will serve you in the same way."

" But who ? " he reiterated, " not Dolly ! "

" No, not Dolly, he is out at the Cape. Come, now, a lady you have met here,—there's a broad hint ! "

The broad hint, had the effect of producing a sudden change in Sir Rupert's expression. He dropped the morsel of cake as if it were a scorpion into the saucer of his tea-cup,—and pushed both hastily away.

" I know who it is," he returned after a moment's silence, " it is Miss Browne."

" No, you are wrong," replied Katie, " it is not Cousin Helen, who has been married,—it is Blanche ! This is Blanche's wedding-cake," once more moving his tea-cup towards him, " and you must eat a morsel just for luck ! "

" Blanche ? " he repeated with a look of indescribable relief ; " well I *am* behind the times ; and who is the happy man ? "

" Your new cousin is an Italian Count, he has a villa near Florence, and Blanche is now the Countess Ravani ! "

" Nonsense, Katie, you are joking ! An Italian ? Where did she pick him up ? "

" I think it was a case of them picking one another up, at Nice. I have just been telling all about the

wedding to Mrs. Foster," looking towards that very plump lady, and endeavouring to make the conversation more general.

Her example was followed by Rupert, who began discoursing with the Misses Foster, about the weather, and his travels ; and they, now that the little party had been augmented by a handsome and eligible bachelor, became more and more animated, and agreeable.

" And so I find my cousin Katie here all alone, and the rest of the family in the South of France.—Even the indomitable Lulu is at school ! "

" Oh ! but Miss Browne is here," returned Miss Foster, " there she is riding up to the door now."

This little piece of information, nearly caused her neighbour to capsize his tea-cup.

" You see the result of being a bad correspondent," he muttered lamely.

" Well ! I'm a bad correspondent myself," admitted Miss Foster.

" By Jove, and so am I," chimed in her brother ; " I suppose it runs in families."

" What runs in families ? " inquired a pleasant young voice. And Helen with her hat, and riding crop in her hand, joined the circle. " I think," smiling at Mrs. Foster, " we all met in the High Street of Wilmington, not long ago ! Katie, my dear, it's all right about the fish,—and I'm just dying——"

At this instant her eyes, which had been travelling round the circle, and getting accustomed to the dusky light of an April afternoon—fell upon a gentleman, sitting with his back to her, who now rose, and said :

" I don't think you met *me* in the High Street this afternoon, Miss Browne ; I hope you have not forgotten me."

For quite half a minute Helen stood in white amazement, she could find no words. They came, they stuck in her throat, but they could get no further. Agitation, suffocating and overwhelming, laid hold on her. At last she stammered out :

" How do you do,—Sir Rupert,—when did you come home ? "

" Only last night," he responded. " I landed in Liverpool yesterday morning."

" And he has been telling us his adventures," volunteered Miss Foster with delightful volubility. " All about the Rocky Mountains, and New York, and his horrid passage over. Have you told us *everything ?* " she continued, beaming up at Sir Rupert, as he stood before her, with a plate of cakes, in either hand.

" You can't expect to be his mother-confessor," said her brother, with a laugh. " You need not imagine you will hear of *all* his experiences."

This was merely intended as a bit of chaff, but somehow it fell uncommonly flat. Sir Rupert looked annoyed, and Katie coloured crimson,—for everyone knew that Captain Foster had the episode of the *duel*, before his mind's eye.

However, Mr. Lamb, the curate, gave a clever turn to the conversation, by recurring to the fact, that good correspondents were rife in some families,—and absent in others !

" I, myself," he announced (with the air of a man who is justly proud of the admission) " am a capital correspondent. I write twice a week to my mother, I write every second mail to my brother at Ceylon——"

" Ah ! and there's someone else, to whom you write every *day*," interrupted Mrs. Foster, in a stage whisper.

The poor curate became scarlet to the edge of his jam-pot collar,—but still persisted manfully :

"I do not think that to my knowledge in the whole course of my life, I have ever left a letter unanswered."

"That is more than you can say, Miss Browne," murmured Sir Rupert, in a tone of reproachful significance.

"I consider it," said the curate as if preaching from a given text, "an act of very gross rudeness, to leave a letter without a reply.—It is an unpardonable slight."

"Do you hear that?" whispered Sir Rupert.

"The cap does not fit *me*," she answered in the same low tone.

"It is precisely the same," resumed Mr. Lamb, "as if a person spoke to you, and you made no answer."

"Precisely the same," acquiesced Sir Rupert.

"And is most painful to people's feelings, and sunders many friendships."

"I believe you are speaking from experience, Lamb," said Captain Foster; "it sounds exactly as if you had a fellow feeling for some poor devil, whose lady-love 'chucked him,' and treated his epistles with silent contempt.—Maybe the case was your own!"

"Really, Tim, you are too ridiculous," protested his mother.

"I declare here, and now, that if ever I fall in love, I shall do my correspondence by telephone."

"Well, at any rate," agreed his youngest sister, "you could not be brought up for breach of promise."

"Now, my dear girls, you really must not stay here all the evening talking nonsense," said their mother, rising. "I have seen the car going round to the door.—A hint from Jones, that we ought to be going!"

So escorted by the three men, she and her daughters bade adieu to their hostesses, and filed out of the room, —still in the full tide of conversation.

Katie and Helen remained behind, and as the former rose from the tea-table, she said, "I shall leave you here to have a *tête-à-tête* with Rupert. I imagine you will have a good deal to say to one another. I intend to ask him to dinner, and I must see, if there will be enough soup to go round? So I'll expect you to entertain him."

"No, no, please don't go away like that!" urged Helen, hurrying after her. "I must take off my habit, and——"

But the swing-door, had already closed behind her cousin, and whatever Helen's objections were, they never reached her ears. Then Sir Rupert entering through the drawing-room, effectually cut off her retreat, by advancing towards her, and declaring that "he was thankful to have an opportunity of speaking to her, for a few moments alone."

These few moments extended to sixty, and needless to add, passed with inconceivable rapidity. The matter of the letter was cleared up, and explained,—Sir Rupert taking anything but a lenient view of his cousin's share in the transaction.—The pros and cons of the duel were confessed, and discussed, and it was fully five minutes, before Helen would allow herself to be persuaded that Señorita Inez had not *some* grounds for her hallucination!

"You know you had no business to go riding and star-gazing and guitar-playing with her," she observed impressively. "It was enough to make her think all manner of things."

"Not a bit of it, my dear Helen, such little frivolities are the natural and innocent amusement of one's idle hours out there,—it is the custom of the country!"

"I believe you trifled with the poor girl's affections," persisted Helen.

"Make your mind easy about her affections," rejoined her companion; "she has already bestowed them elsewhere. Inez has married a wealthy fellow-countryman, and made a most suitable match. I sent a wedding present from New York!"

"You did?"

"Yes! and probably she will return the compliment. I hope her gift will take the form of some boxes of excellent dried fruit. You never tasted anything more delicious, and I know you have a sweet tooth!"

"You seem to take a good deal for granted; your wedding, and your presents, included," she replied with a smile.

"One wedding in a family is bound to make another!" he answered complacently; "not that I can ever bring myself to think well of the present bride, I don't feel that I could ever speak to her again. Still, in one respect,—I shall follow her example."

"What example?" inquired Katie, whose entrance had been quite unnoticed; "who are you talking about?"

"Blanche! and her example," he replied. "I intend to be married—before the roses are out."

"Oh! do you indeed? and the lady——?" glancing at Helen.

"Do not appeal to me, Katie. I know nothing whatever about it," she protested, but her crimson cheeks belied her words—"and now, I'm going to dress!"

THE END

Printed at The Chapel River Press, Kingston, Surrey.